Slide On The Run

Mick Farren

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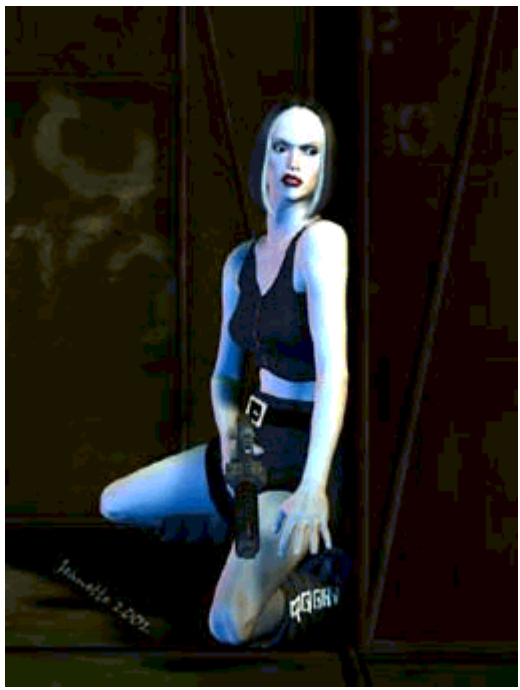
Episode One
This Fucking Body's Nine Parts Shot!

The quasi-woman who undulated professionally in front of him was arrayed in a second skin of white latex, complete with a form fitting hood that totally encased her head, save for a ponytail switch of hair, teased from a vent in the back of hood, a little above the nape of her neck.



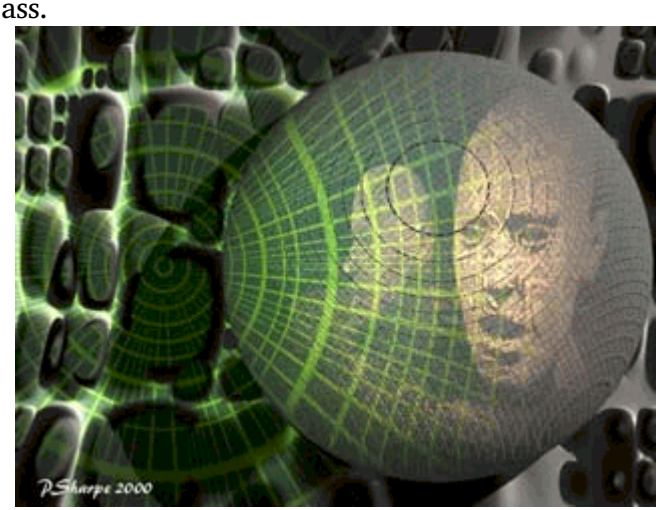
It perversely reminded Slide of the single scalp lock of the traditional tribal Cossack, or the tail of a blood-line true palomino mare. The hood completely hide her features and she was only identifiable by the form of her body, her trademark long legs, prominent hip bones, and maybe something in the way she moved. She wore white rubber cocktail gauntlets with fingers ending in fake nails that, as far as Slide could tell, were constructed from white titanium, pointed as icepicks and as sharp as razors, protracted feline claws at full extension, and with a wicked scimitar curve. The facepiece of the hood was akin to a gas mask, but mysterious as a domino. Dark, unreadable eyes looked out from behind the built-in, circular goggles of tinted glass, while a white ribbed hose projected from the center of the mask like a pachyderm nose, curving round to the left side of her waist to vanish somewhere Slide could not see but

only imagine.

"Do me a favor? Please? Just get the fuck away from me. This fucking body's nine parts shot."

Yancey Slide was on the run again.

The Howdy Hole had deposited him in a place of spheres, down in the Gantenbrink matter of the sub-atomic foam. He was confronted with identical orbs, floating in random patterns of tachyon flux, with full substance, but neither sound nor color, and stretching as far as his demon perception could perceive, each one's perfection only marred by the letterbox shadow slit of a Borkhist wormhole tag-patch. Slide's body was shredding fast. His physical form was actually falling apart, and it was probably getting the best of the deal. Fortunately for his entirety, sub-atomic foam could be persuaded to be at least temporarily accommodating, and allow itself to gathered and molded it into a rough approximation of body tissue. Even after these makeshift repairs, to say Slide was messed up was like calling the Atlantic Ocean "damp". Mercifully his silver flask was still full of old, bad, Red Army vodka, distilled from MIG 15 antifreeze, and well spiked with tetradetoxin, the puffer fish derivative used in the traditional zombie process. It messed up humans real good, but, for a demon, it could help slow a rapid bout of borrowed-body degenerative decay. The free floating cooch joint, however, was what had really saved his ass.



The interdimension fun-mill's grab-a-rube gravity just sucked him in towards the orbiting lights and virtuals, which proved blinding up close, and came in over seven thousand cultural equivalents, of which Slide could perceive at least half, and which gave him a headache on top of everything else.

At first the Skylars had been reluctant to admit him when he had lurched up to the portal with hardly a body, and riddled with bullet

and blast holes patched up with sub-foam. They knew he could only have come directly from the carnage on the Darogad, and they didn't need any on-the-lam demon-merc deserters in their pseudo-saloon. Then an old Skylar 5 flash-signed to the others that this was the original Yancey Slide and not to fuck with him if they knew what was good for them. Once inside and in the cloaking chamber, the Skylar 5 had tossed him a spray can. "Use the damned ectoplasm before you melt all over the floor."

"You got a mirror and something to wear?"

"Complimentary kimono or hood-habit?"

"Hood-habit. I ain't got enough body for a kimono. And what about a piece of complimentary hardware?"

"You know I can't loan you a piece."

"Not even a belly gun, like for insurance. Particle beam or Derringer. I ain't fussy."

"No chance."

"Give me a break. Right now I'm posted as a deserter in at least three of the wars."

"Weapon-free establishment, ain't we?"

Slide knew better than to ask the Skylar 5 a third time, and, hidden by his new hood-habit, he moved on inside the cooch, where he had been almost immediately hustled by the quasi in white latex, who refused to take "get the fuck away from me" as an answer. Her crotch was on his eye level as he sagged in the amorphous, womb-soft shaper-couch, and she tried one last shot. "I thought you demons couldn't be killed."

"Not in the strictest sense, but we can be royally and painfully fucked up."

"So why don't we play out what's left on the old body, baby?. I thought demons could do anything."

Neurons fluttered angrily in his exhausted brain. Telling him, should he be so much as tempted, to not even think about it. Slide sighed. "It's too late for anything like that."

"So why the fuck did you come in here at all?"

"For a drink, and to get out of the war."

"The wars are a long way from here."

"Not far enough, kid."

The girl in latex moved on, clearly shrink-game trained or plex-programmed not to push the hustle beyond predetermined bounds. Finally left to himself to lay limp in the softness of the shaper-couch, Slide gave the interior of the cooch the gunfighter once-over. Inside the soft-light sugar walls, the wars actually did take on an unreal distance. Billows of pink and turquoise sweet-vented up like pillars from the floor, maintaining their integrity to a high chaos-point, and

then precipitating into miniature storms of gelatinous colored rain that was gathered in ornamental gutters. The joint was busy, but that was the way of the cooch in high times of crisis with little but conflict above, below, and beyond. And it took all kinds to make a crowd; human girls and boys, lads and lassies, all for hire, squid-lid pukes and familiars, a single pair of twin-matched paracletes, plus a scattering of reptiles and invertebrates. Dwarves in military dress blues, bearing medals and strange insignia, looked on with over-sized Beefeater Martinis in their stubby fists, while lizard men from the frightened cities of the hollow earth, doing passable - if scaly - impersonations of Joan Crawford, tangoed with young men in transparent body shirts, sun glasses and impossibly tight black jeans, who must have planned their look to resemble the young Lou Reed. Italian baby wiseguys, in black fascisti shirts, white suits with wide lapels, and flared pants looked on in nervous and Saturday-night-fevered contemplation at things that could only be blobs of pure and formless evil, thinking that maybe they should never have left the Galaxy 2000 in the first place.

Visiting mouth breeders sported in a tank between the bubble streams and the pendant rainbow crystals of aquarium chandeliers, creating hundreds of replicas of themselves as they rock & rolled, babies that Slide knew, without a doubt, would find themselves on the next day's menu in the restaurant, probably in heavy cream sauce and with a chopped garnish. A Krishna pimp paraded with a swaying, finger-cymbal string of five of his stable of slit-sari Hindu whores with yabyum dots on their foreheads. A gilded boy in spandex, and the kind of tan that could only end in melanoma, performed queer tribal dances with roots in the Hitchhike and the Batman with another quasi women in the standard form-fitting latex and goggles and ribbed nose hose, in her case, color-coded acid yellow. The couple were watched with admiration by things not of this earth in metallic capes, with exposed exterior brain cases and name tags that read "Hi, I'm Cwwymbvw." Was it possible that Mars still needed women after all these millennia?

A small green lizard scrambled up onto the shaper and sank against Slide's left thigh. The demon glared at it. "Get the fuck away from me. I didn't ask for reptile contact. If I wanted a frog, I'd lick it."

The lizard looked at Slide with reproachful and swivelling jewel eyes. "I was just trying to get warm."

"So get warm elsewhere. I'm not a heat source."

As he spoke, he noticed two spook-looking men hunched over a monitor table playing Shoot The Fat Elvis, with a concentration that either indicated that they were hazarding for real readies or faking it, and if they were faking it they were most probably spooks, Imperial Intelligence Agency or worse. They had that outside look of IIA. Pork

pie hats and round indigo glasses as though dressing identically constituted a disguise. Maybe, later, they would require a quiet warning. Don't fuck with me, boys. I'm a genuine fucking demon from all the way back. On the other hand, for Yancey to do anything to draw attention to himself right then was probably a big mistake. He hadn't been lying or running a hardluck tale to the Skylar 5 about being posted as a three time deserter. He all too clearly remembered the exact thought that had encapsulated his improvised exit from the conflict.

Fuck this for a sense of adventure.

Enough had been enough. Turquoise phosphorous had streamed from the Delta Vulcan's undersides as they had made their strafing runs, igniting as it touched, turning at least quasi-human men into windmilling fiery special effects. And as if the chemical fire wasn't enough on its own, needleguns ripped fragment spirals and.70 caliber hollow point HE, like angry bees, chewed through the flames, and the lucky ones were cut to pieces before they fried. The Delta Vulcans would have blotted the sun from the sky, if we'd had the luxury of either, as they barreled across the hard deck with a howl that ended all other sound, while the grunts-of-the-thrall fell to attitudes of prayer and pleaded for the blessing of divine cover. Slide, demon that he was, grinned to himself even as he clung the reverberating ground.

Nothing divine round these parts, lads, just scorching destruction. The

Darogad had become an abattoir of machine slaughter, a killing field, pure and simple. Even to one like Slide, who had an age-long experience of violence and horror, the level of slaughter was almost beyond comprehension. In the most literal terms, the battle plain was shambles in which the men and the others died where they stood. Of course, Slide couldn't die, but the body he currently occupied was taking a dreadful beating, and wouldn't hold out much longer. Had he been human, he'd have been dead ten times over. Even the predator gas bladders in from the way-beyond, drawn by the curiosity when the first TV images of Dachau hit their star system, were now no more than rotting shreds. Only one word for it. The old Marine Corp's epithet, cluster-fuck; an out of the time stream, multidimensional cluster-fuck. That said it all.

I should never have signed up for this cluster-fuck in the first place.

This was double fucking jeopardy, played out against a moonscape diorama of shell craters and sandbags, shattered and blighted trees, ruined foxholes, and shreds of men and uniforms hanging on rust-red razor wire. Trenches were choked with mud, corpses, and slime-green toxic water, while skulls were crushed under the tracks of armored vehicles from the recent past, and the distant Skynet future, and vampire butterflies, heavy from deep and unstinted drinking, lazily flapped and flew, seemingly unaware of the relentless flak and radiation. Only the Moderns and the Futures now remained to continue the futile fight. The Retros were long gone. Macedonian phalanxes, Zulu impis, and rifle companies from the Somme had been mown down in the first minutes of engagement like stands of wheat. The Redcoats had formed desperate squares, and the Prussian cavalry, black plumes tossing, had charged through plasma bursts with all the courage of the truly insane. The Red Fog had eaten away the mail and Damascus blades of the Saracens, scorched their lungs, and liquefied their screaming horses' eyes. Seeing what had come to pass, the Zouaves and Legionaries had taken to their heels, but all to late, dying with the final knowledge that they had been capriciously sacrificed to nothing more than a moment of spectacle, and a megalomaniac leader's vanity of pomp and circumstance. He could see a spectral Howdy trace above the ruin of a shell hole, and Slide stumbled painfully to his feet, tossing away the burned-out blaster, and limping towards what could just be his salvation.

It's time to cut your losses, boy, and get the fuck out of here.

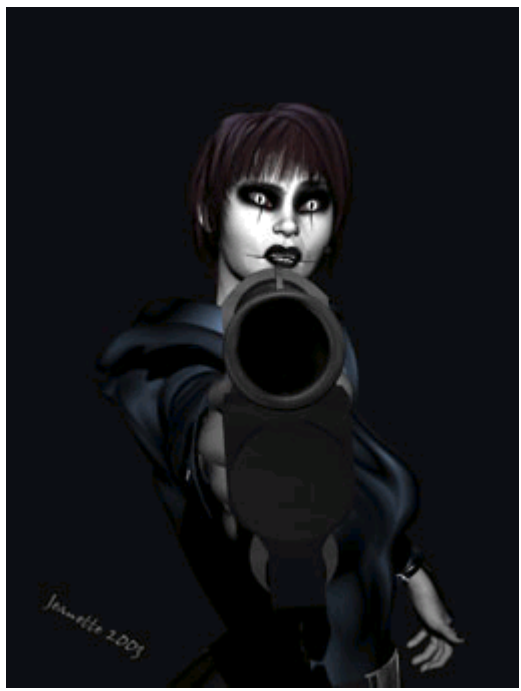
In the cooch joint, the quasi-woman in white, having failed to entice Slide, was now homing in on two men playing Shoot The Fat Elvis. She made to do nothing more than put down a side-bet, but Slide was pretty damn certain he'd detected a communication pass. Did that mean she was IIA too? Probably not an agent, but almost

certainly hard wired as a Data Collector. Every quasi in a place like this had to be playing one or more side-angles. Even with tips and hustles, they didn't make enough for it to be otherwise. With little or no doubt she'd been checking him out, sniffing what she could from the hooded stranger with a borrowed body as ragged as Swiss cheese. How could he expect otherwise? Slide couldn't see that she could have learned much. He'd told the Skylar 5 more about himself, but Skylars were famous for keeping what they knew to themselves. That's why they were Skylars in the first place. The quasi was probably looking to part up with what crumbs she'd gleaned for a spare change gratuity. If they were Imperials, he should have been up and gone. No way did he want to fall back into the hands of Hassan IX's people, especially the Ministry of Virtue. Had he been fit he would have already been on the move, not taking any chances, but pain and exhaustion were making him lazy, willing to risk all to sit and hurt for a while. Maybe he should have hijacked the lizard's body and slithered out of there unnoticed. Slide preferred to be bipedal, at the very least humanoid. He had tried a reptilian corpus a couple of times when nothing else had been available, and he really hadn't liked it.

Then the portal fluttered and all of Yancey Slide's speculations became redundant. A three-team of Pentecostal Fire Boys on the snatch came in; probably freelance skip-chasers but maybe GS-AS which was as good as freelance in this reality. That familiar watchful silence fell, proving better than any mission credentials that these newcomers had jurisdiction. The game engines whispered to a stop. Just to hone the edge of the tension, the three-team had a snitch in tow, his head swathed in the traditional Informer's Mask, so the canary could see and not be seen, identify but not be recognized. As the scary quartet made their slow, curious, and all seeing circuit, no one moved. This was a circumstance in which any sudden reaction could prove fatal.

If you were on their list, forget about it. With the Fire Boys actually in the room, to run would be death or worse. Finally they halted and all who breathed held their's. The snitch pointed with the Hand of Doom at the gilded boy in spandex, the one with tan who'd been dancing. The reductor flashed and, without a word, the kid was 2Ded into a null cookie in a sparkle of flux-flutter, leaving only the unmistakable whiff of ozone and antimatter.

The three-team turned and the snitch continued to scan the crowd. Slide didn't have to wait for the informer's theatrics. When his head stopped moving Slide knew the sonofabitch was looking at him. He pushed back the hood of his habit and slowly raised his rotting hands into plain sight. "You got me, boys. You've nabbed po' Yancey. I'll come quietly. You won't need the fire."



Story so far - *At the peak of the great Battle of the Fifteen Armies, Yancey Slide, Ronin Demon of the Tenth Continuum, sees all is lost for the Allied cause. He becomes a deserter, fleeing the Darogad by means of a Howdy Hole. Taking refuge in a cooch joint he is betrayed by a Masked Informer to a three-team of Pentecostal Fire Boys.*

Episode Two
Doing The Jump Without A Body

Johnny Yuma hadn't been able to find any speed. He had been deprived of amphetamine for more than ninety six hours. The Blimp had been monopolizing the living room, smoking some black-sticky bastard-concoction from south of the border, and washing it down with tequila straight from the bottle while watching pay-for-porno on the Russian mob's black satellite. Johnny had tried a couple of hits on the glass and tinfoil burner, but it had only made him want to vomit, which said a great deal for the Blimp's capacity for consumption if nothing for his taste. After a while, Johnny had also found himself sickened by all the cocks, cunts, garter belts, and lousy drum machine music on the big TV, and he retreated to the privacy of his bedroom to seek either death or oblivion. Fourteen Valium had finally put him to sleep, but then he was unable to wake from the nightmare. And was it some fucking nightmare. Usually Johnny Yuma came out his dreams screaming. In this one he was screaming going in. He screamed until he was dizzy, but it didn't make a blind bit of difference. The cacophony just smashed back at him with some Newtonian equal-and-opposite logic, along with a vast reverberating boom, like the towering rhythmic rage of some vast aquatic mammal. Johnny Yuma was submerged in a pit or tank. A pit of worms? Snakes? No. Not alive. Neither vertebrate nor oozing things; they were cables, roiling, squirming, fully articulated, varying in size from a domestic power cord to miro-filaments, some transparent, some blue-black, a scattering of red, and small but crucial coils that glowed bad, alien-with-gangrene green. All seemed controlled by their own innate quasi-intelligence, or maybe a single integrated mind, but that told Johnny Yuma a great secret within itself. He was being changed. Johnny Yuma didn't use phrases like "their own innate quasi-intelligence, or maybe a single integrated mind", dude. But more and more Johnny Yuma wasn't Johnny Yuma anymore.

He was being penetrated with all the symbolic and physical implications that came with the statement. Violated, invaded, fucked; although he wasn't sure if "fucked" applied. To be fucked, even to be raped, implied that whatever or whoever was doing the fucking would remove itself when the rape was complete. Johnny Yuma could detect no such guarantee. The cables appeared to be fixing to stay. They were even adapting him to their liking, sucking, shaping and changing the crucial him all through his being. A TV screen appeared. and with its coming all else was black. His screaming continued but the

foldback seemed to have been turned down. The picture on the screen was of huge rabbits, the size of city buses, lolloping down Fifth Avenue in New York City, somewhere in the thirties, snacking on available sidewalk trees. ("How the fuck long is this going to take?")

("How the fuck should I know, I just run the program?")

The screen blipped and vanished and Johnny Yuma was drowning again in the all consuming cables. His mind was no longer working the way it had. All was plastic stretch and distortion. Simple arithmetic flattered. The spot on the dice didn't tally. Insulated vinyl sheathing was coating his brain. His bones were charged, electric, grinding like tortured machinery as they adjusted, but adjusted to what? Again the lights went out and the TV returned. Now the image was much smaller, or maybe distant, as though it had moved away from him. This image was of a woman's hand, with long, extended and carefully shaped fingernails, perfectly finished in paint the color of the flame. They were being roughly hacked short and ragged by a pair of crude kitchen scissors.

"I'm standing here with no fucking body, and wondering how much long it's going to take three very pissed off Pentecostal Fire Boys to figure out what I did, how I did it, and come after me?"

"Fuck you Slide, you go in when you go in."

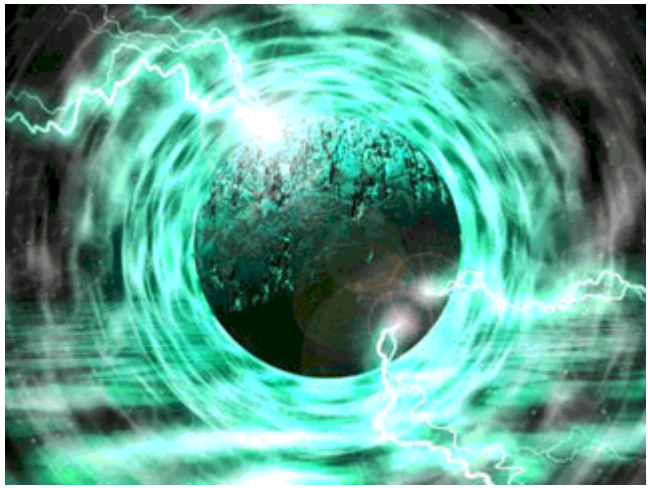
Johnny Yuma could feel almost nothing left of what he considered himself. He was one with the wires. His identity was slipping away as the scissors chopped the nails. The image vanished and his self awareness with it. Johnny Yuma's final vision was just a tiny white blip that only stayed long enough to extinguish itself and vanish. Bye-bye Johnny.

"Okay, you got the corpus."

"About fucking time."

YUMA/BLACK/BLACK/BLACK/BLACK/BLACK/SLIDE

Slide hit Earth, fully discorporate, at the start of the twenty first century, but his landfall wasn't as tidy as it should have been. He was on the barrier cusp of the randomly selected dimension and leakthrough was all over in form of minor



front-end and after-images. But that faded as he lined up with the prevailing time stream. What did anyone expect? He'd done the jump without a body. He was free of the Pentacostals, but where the fuck was he? The room in which he found himself was the third floor hovel of some speedfreak, junkie, stained-sheet grahzny, and the way Slide's luck was running, the cadaver was probably wasted from some fatally debilitating retro-virus. He was evidently somewhere, though, and that was an anytime improvement on discorporate time-tidal drifting. Slide sat up and rolled over with very little pain considering the levels of intoxicant abuse to which this body felt like it had been exposed for some protracted period. On the floor by the bed was a pair of narrow black jeans. In the back pocket was a wallet and in the wallet was a driver's license in the name of John Wayne Yumac, but other more trivial documentation that showed the former went by the name of Johnny Yuma. Slide sighed. Johnny Yuma? Give him a fucking break. This sonofabitch probably had warrants out on him. He pulled on the jeans and looked out of the window, over a rusting terminator side of a-city-that-no-one-wanted where rotting railroad spurs had been abandoned by the retreat of heavy industry.

"Choice neighborhood."

Slide knew he shouldn't be too judgmental. Most realities in this quadrant had already fallen to The Empire of the Mole People or the Retards' Crusade. At least this shithole had television. Slide turned on the TV and grazed to what was billed as the Sci-Fi Channel. He expected Star Trek and was pleased when he got it. Admiral Spock on the USS Bounty gave him an approximation of the Q-bias and DZM displacement. As if in confirmation he heard a muffled boom and a distant tremor shook the building. Urban nadsat juvie-bombers in this stream; probably augmented by random arson, and more legit political terror. He guessed he could have done worse although the place was probably overpopulated by feral baby-bouncers, hormone geeks, mindless shvat-whores, and the kinda pukes who collected Nazi empty Zyclon B canisters with letters of authentication. Such was

the detritus of a civilization in free fall but at least in this place Hassan IX would still be underground with his Mu-deer Network and dogpack of Al-zabadi Boys. Later Slide would check who was US President. That would pin the exactitude closer to the parsec.

Slide moved from bedroom to a bathroom which was equally filthy and disgusting, and looked at himself in a cracked and flyblown, flaking mirror. What he saw was a skinny greaser with a Ratfink-copy tattoo, and a death's head ring on the third finger of his left hand. He pushed the lank hair out of his eyes, and rearranged the face to make it more threatening than hunted, more predator than prey, more plausibly demon. In his infinite time, Yancey Slide had occupied more

human bodies than he could count, and he knew that, just like all the others, this vehicle of flesh, blood, and toxins would gradually change, and start to look like all the others, but he didn't want to wait. Temporarily satisfied with the adjustments, he splashed water on his face, and took a deep breath. Someway, sometime, he would return to a dimension where he could wild with his own blazing right-fire, but, until them he would play out the hand.

The body wanted a cigarette. Like most pre-owned vehicles it came with a smeary residue of the previous occupant's primary addictions. He walked the body back into the bedroom, getting the feel of it. A half full pack of Mild Sevens were among the clutter. He shook one out left-handed and lit it with the flame rose from his right index-finger and he took a deep drag. This Yuma had used his floor as a wardrobe. Clothing was littered along with beer cans, girlie mags, fast food containers, and old newspapers. A tabloid headline read HIT THE DIRT!, another I DONE IT! Slide smelled a shirt. It would do. He did not have time to dress with taste. He could sense a second human who needed neutralizing. Across a living-room that was little more than a couch, a bigger TV with audio-muted porn still pink-skin flickering, and a continuation of the garbage-floor motif, a fat sweat hog wallowed snoring in his disgusting pit. Slide sniffed. "I guess it's a question of wake him or kill him."

Or both, but in which order? The bastard was fat, a real human planet who oozed in enough pre-packaged filth to make the late Yuma look house-proud. Along with the black jeans, Slide had annexed Yuma's scuffed engineer boots. He poked the planet in an approximation of it's equator with the toe of a boot. The mass of offal was in a position as though he had passed out while masturbating, and now he grunted and gurgled with the incomprehension of waking outrage. "Fuck, Johnny? What the fuck? What the fuck?"

"What do they call you?"

The obese man-toad blinked. "You know what I'm called."

"Just tell me."

The fat man looked nervous but also reasonably familiar with the irrational and psychotic. "They call me the Blimp."

"I need money, Blimp."

"Fuck, Johnny, has the geezin' crystal finally Swiss-rolled your brain?."

"Look at me very, very carefully you over-fed fuck. Do you see any trace of your erstwhile homeboy known as one Yuma, Johnny?"

The Blimp looked into Slide's eyes, shook his head hard, and gulped his terror."What the fuck is happening? What are you?"

"You don't need to know."

"But…

"Money?"

"I don't have any money."

Slide knew the Blimp for exactly what he was. Dimes of this, grams of that, deals and fencing shit for ten year-old housebreakers, and then back-recruit them for kiddie porn, and some time a honey with a jones and no money could take a deep breath, close her eyes and suck him off for a taste of that for which she hurt. The Blimp had a cache of cash someplace. No question. Slide appropriated the mind of the fat bastard and sent back to where he, Slide, had just come from, to see if a whiff of the Darogad would get his attention. The saucers were moving in at a more leisurely pace, mopping up whatever was left at least partially alive. The EM blasts were so thick upon the ground they notched a higher resolve than what the grunts and troopers laughingly called reality. Running at a straight and true 447.5 MHz, the too-bad Frequency-of-Satan, they rez-stripped, and roentgened clear and metallic, right to the nerve endings like a sterile, high conductivity, ozone torture. The Blimp got it all and screamed.

"Coffee can!"

Slide saw a Maxwell House coffee can, one of the kind with the trick base they sold in drug paraphernalia stores. He unscrewed it and discovered close to seven hundred dollars in a roll of dirty twenties and hundreds. "And what else do we have here?"

Beside the coffee can was a fancy-ass, fifty caliber Desert Eagle, all new chrome and black plastic, and firing half an inch of Teflon coated slug that could crack the engine block of a city bus in anyone's time zone. Fuck the nine gods, consumer humanity in the twenty-first century, a fucking plague with few if redeeming features.

"You shoulda kept this toy under your pillow."

Slide slid out the clip. Loaded. Better and better.

The Blimp blubbered. "Don't kill me."

"Why not, Fats. Wouldn't I be doing the culture a favor?"

"I'll beg."

The idea of a naked and toad-like fat human groveling for his life was a little more than Slide could take so soon in the sector, but, instead of the shooting him, because, even in this dogbreath reality, it might have attracted attention, he flipped him back into the battle field illusion. The Blimp then commenced to scream. And the Blimp had cause. In his mind, he was naked among the dead. Not a fucking thing to do about it; no available refuge, no shelter from the hard-rain, or the knowledge that, on a carpet torrent of plasma projections, the flying saucers would drift silently and majestically forward for the finally mopping up, the phase of defeat when decimation turned to extermination.

"Shut the fuck up, or I'll gouge out your eyes in the here and now

and really give you something to scream about."

The Blimp fell silent. Now he only squirmed, although at the same time achieving a small and flaccid erection. Slide didn't want to guess what the Blimp found to be a turn on. Instead he looked for a phone amid the slovenly trash. "Gotta find out if Doc Zen's operating."

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Three blocks away, Nuygen von Bulow picked up the intercept, and smiled triumphantly at The Humiliation. "Just as I predicted. He's looking for Doc Zen." Nuygen von Bulow was an entity that, had Slide know she was listening to his call, would have evoked in him, among other more violent reactions, a curse on himself for a bad bout of overweening veteran's contempt. He'd landed at random in twenty-one dogbreath in the twilight of its techno-gods, and might be forgiven for not expecting high-test trouble to be ready and waiting. He knew better than that. He knew that, in the Fullness, all things were possible and nothing is forgiven. The last time that Yancey Slide had seen Nuygen von Bulow she had been felating a High-Soviet Knight of the KGB with a pistol to her head, and since it was Slide who had precipitated her into the less than welcome predicament, even for the creative von Bulow, he would not have

doubted she meant him anything but harm at that moment. Yancey Slide had been at odds with Nuygen von Bulow ever since he had first met her when she had been the pupil of Shiro Ishi during the notorious human vivisection experiments at Unit 7-31 in Japanese occupied Manchuria, but where Shiro had been at least approximately human, von Bulow was anything but. Shiro himself would certainly attest to this, especially when, in white furs and with a bullwhip, she'd drive him into the snow. She was perhaps a drencrom succubus with ambition, or a mutant demon of a kind he had never previously encountered. She didn't smell demon, but Slide

knew how nothing could ever be counted on in this neck of time. "And he doesn't have the faintest inkling I am here."

And the way she smugly seized the testicles of The Humiliation in a slim and black gloved right hand, and with uncommonly long and slender fingers squeezed them triumphantly hard, indicated that was exactly how she wanted it.

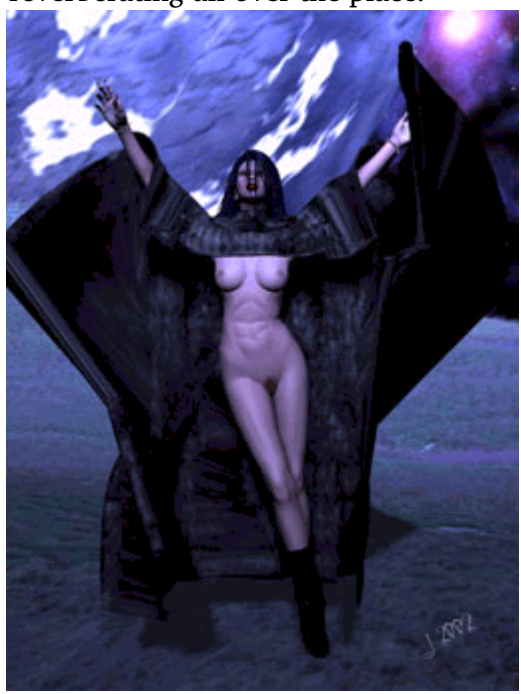
All Slide knew was that the phone rang three times and when Doc Zen answered, he sounded dreadful "This had better be fucking good."

"Doc, it's Slide."

"About time you fucking called, do you know how much trouble you're in?"

"What's the time context on the trouble, Doc?"

"From here to fucking eternity, boy. From here to fucking eternity. You're reverberating all over the place."



Story so far: *Having deserted the Allies at the height of the Battle of the Fifteen Armies, and escaped capture in a cooch joint by a three-team of Pentecostal Fire Boys, Yancey Slide, Idimmu Demon of the Tenth Continuum, exits into an Earth Urban C21, where he appropriates the body a merzky speedfreak by the name of Johnny Yuma, terminating the mind and incarnation of Yuma in the process. His first goal is to see Doc Zen and find out what's what, but, unknown to Slide, his dimension transit has not gone unobserved.*

Episode Three
Art's Snooker - Second Floor

As Yancey Slide exited the street door of the walk-up tenement firetrap that had been the domicile of the former Johnny Yuma and the Blimp, he had noticed the stretch Hummer limousine that rolled slowly past him. The absurdly extended, laughably impractical vehicle was impossible to ignore or overlook, even for one as preoccupied as Slide had become since, on the phone, Doc Zen had told him that he was "reverberating from there to fucking eternity." He hadn't, however thought too much about the limo, dismissing it as the transport of idiot celebrities looking for drugs and the dubious thrill of coming to cop in a grahzny neighborhood. Such was the way of it in a C21 reality of free-falling civilization. As if in confirmation, a P.D. black and white swung in behind the Hummer, but with its sirens quiet and no lights flashing, delivering a warning rather than making a stop. In a clearly decaying and resentful part of town, the cops didn't need any rich and slumming narco-tourists. Satisfied the limo had nothing to do with him, Slide turned his attention back to the sidewalk, and the deft negotiation of all the lurking beggars, wino-bums and wandering alkies, plus the soft parade the baby-bouncing nadsat juvies, and hormone geeks talking to their invisible friends that made walking awkward, and the you-imagine-it-I'll-do-it shvat-whores in their tight-high-and-low-cuts, with whom he should avoid eye contact so as not to start a keening chorus of the ritual "meee sooo horneeee, babeee." With his attention thus wholly engrossed he never gave the ludicrous limousine the kind of deep idimmu examination that would have revealed Nuygen von Bulow as the passenger within. Later Slide would try to blame his oversight on the occupied body of Johnny Yuma. The body was starting in on a chemical jones, and that might well prove to be an annoying problem. Non-specific receptors wanted a random combination of stimulants and narcotics, and bio-figured that just about anything would do as long as it delivered the buzz and stopped the itching and sniffing, but Slide knew that once the buzz was in place, it would probably start whining for physical gratification. He fallen into a body with a bad case of permanent dissatisfaction. Right at that moment, the need was only a slow jangle, but he knew it would undoubtedly grow worse as the day progressed. Fuck you, Johnny Yuma, wherever you were. He considered making a body jump. The last thing he needed was to be on the lam with a hold-over, secondhand, multiple-abuse addiction. He had more important things to do with his time than to be running down hole-in-

the-wall drug dealers for a marginal body that was aching and sweating, stumbling in slow-motion indolence, or twitching and babbling. Maybe a pint of tequila would be enough to set the body to temporary rights. He made a mental note to stop at a liquor store once he had seen Doc Zen, and wondered if codeine was sold over the counter in this particular C21. A couple of shots of tetradetoxin would have brought the damned body under complete control, but where could you get tetradetoxin in a shithole like this?

Inside the Hummer, Sharkboy thumbed the Apex to standby and minimized the safety in preparation for locking onto Slide. "Do I take him now?"

Nuygen von Bulow rolled over on the vehicle's teardrop command bed, peered out of the smoked glass window, and shook her head. "He's on his way to Doc Zen. If we wait, we can take both them, or at least have Slide when he knows a bit more. I would imagine, right now, he's close to clueless."

The limo was multi-dimensional and customized Tardis-style, so it was massively more spacious within than the exterior of the stretch Hummer could ever have indicated. Outside the smoke-black glass of the window was twenty-first century Earth, inside was her own world of drencrom conditioned depravity, a fluid and tubular space that undulated like a section of some vast intestine, in crude pseudo-sympathy with the Great Flux, and had irregular asymmetric windows and lozenge-shaped display screens set in the continuous wall. A murmuring mercury cascade made patterns between them, and streamers of blue and purple vapor decorated the air. The Humiliation lay at Nuygen von Bulow's feet, licking and suckling on the long cruel heel of her left boot with rapt concentration, blurring the mirror finish of the patent leather with its breath. Its maleshape was fixed by steel clamps and a locked exoskeleton, while pleasure/pain drip-catheters protruding from the remaining soft-sections.

The Humiliation had been with von Bulow longer than most could remember, and some rumors claimed she had owned the creature for centuries, although the rumors never quite defined by what timescale these centuries were calculated. That Nuygen von Bulow should not dismiss and replace her attendant Humiliations with anything like the rapidity that she changed the rest of her entourage, was, of course, highly understandable. Of those

who attempted the initiation only a tiny percentage ever survived, and even less were ever deemed suitable for servitude. Even the current Humiliation was put away for long periods, stored frozen and dreamless in the null-void while not wanted, as when von Bulow had been in Manchuria with Shiro Ishi for the Unit 7-31 atrocities, or when it had lingered longer still while she had been imprisoned by the High-Soviet Knights of the KGB.

In a black skinsuit of tuck-and-roll, armored latex, and wearing the silver eagle insignia of the Ninth Legion to which he was in no way entitled, Sharkboy crouched over the y-tech, assisted by a Zeech in its personal life-tank. Sharkboy was fairly new to von Bulow's traveling retinue, and, as she saw it, he would be lucky to remain much longer. The combination of his insolence and feral overeagerness to inflict painful and lingering fatalities was beginning to irritate her. Normally she would not have entertained any objection to a techhand who combined gratuitous cruelty with a killer relish, but she sensed the Sharkboy harbored a concealed but nonetheless vaunting ambition. Nuygen von Bulow expected nothing short of fawning devotion, and, in one who though more about his own advancement than her's, devotion could never be anything but a temporary and self-serving sham. She had flogged, lacerated, and electrocuted him on a number of occasions, well beyond any capacity on his part to enjoy the punishment, and, although he had bowed

bloody from the whip, blade, and super conducting paddles, and appeared chastened to the point of abject, she sensed his contrition was an act, another deception, and she was of a mind that, very shortly he would have to go. Indeed, Sharkboy must cease to exist. Even in his short time with her, he had seen far to much to be allowed to stray loose-lipped and untrustworthy.

Unaware of these thought of his doom, Sharkboy turned from the y-tech displays and the controls of the multi-dimensional vehicle and looked at von Bulow. "I could take Slide easily. Piece of cake."

"I said wait didn't I?" "I have him in the cross-hairs. I could at least lock on to him."

Von Bulow jerked into a sitting position, lacerating the Humiliation's tongue with the heel of her shoe, and all but cracking its beak in the process. "Don't reveal yourself as more of a fool than you have already demonstrated. He's idimmu. He would notice the lock immediately."

"It would be very easy."

"You crave yet another electrical beating?"

The Zeech wetly distanced itself as Sharkboy lowered his head in faux subservience. "No ma'am."

"Then do as you are told and be quiet."

"Yes, ma'am."

The Humiliation made a moist blubbering sound, and von Bulow slapped it sharply across its approximation of a penis with a slim black glove. Sharkboy was silent for slightly more than a local minute, and then glanced back again. "Ma'am?"

"Now what?"

"A native law unit has moved in behind us."

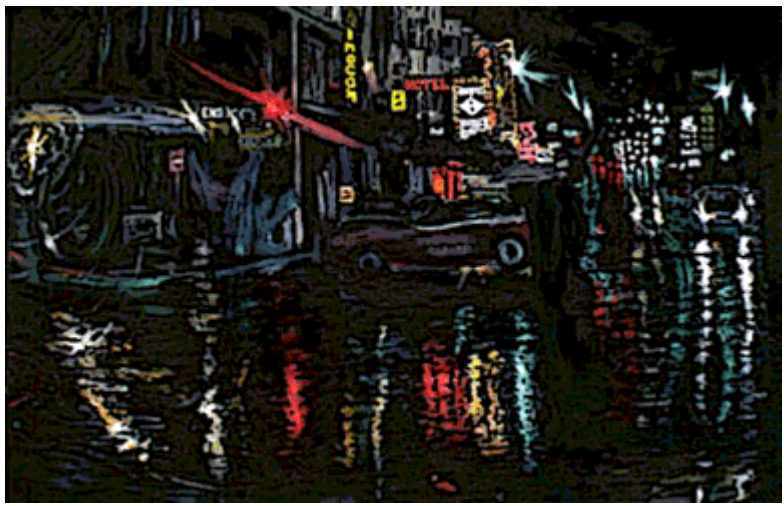
"That is no problem. It will be Bannion. We have an arrangement."

Von Bulow decided that she would keep Sharkboy with her until Slide was brought down. After that she world rid herself of him. He was clearly impossible, but to replace a combined killer and techhand and recruit anew in the middle of a mission was too much trouble, no matter how much he vexed her. Tolerating Sharkboy would be worth the trouble if, at the culmination of this excursion, she saw Slide suffer. As far as Nuygen von Bulow was concerned, Slide had to suffer. Suffering was going to be his manifest destiny, if she had any hand in it. And after she'd had her fill of watching him suffer, she would hand him over to the highest bidder, either the Pentecostal Fire Boys, who were still hot about losing him in the cooch, or one of the other crews of bounty hunters who sought him all over the Fullness. That way, pleasure would be combined with a reasonably excessive profit. She still blamed the unpleasantness with the High-Soviet Knights on Slide,

and that was only the most recent negative incident in a series of unresolved conflicts between her and the idimmu demon that extended back along the millennia and across the dimensional divides.

"Slide appears about to enter a building."

This time, von Bulow did not reprimand Sharkboy for speaking before he was spoken to. She peered through the closest window. Slide had halted in front of a doorway above which a dirty lightbox sign read; ART'S SNOOKER - SECOND FLOOR.



Slide halted. The two goons who flanked the door were looking at him with disparaging expressions. "How many times do we have to warn you, Yuma?"

Slide had, of course, never seen either of them before in all of his near-infinite lifespan, but that they knew and apparently disliked Johnny Yuma was another reason for Slide to strongly suspect that he had chosen the

wrong body when he'd made reality-fall after his untidy escape from the cooch joint. He smiled politely, and spoke with a mild tone. "I think we're all under something of a misapprehension here. I might look like the person you know as Johnny Yuma, but I can an assure you that I'm not."

The goon on the left, a shaved head muscle-builder with a stud in his lip, and a teardrop tattoo at the corner of his left eye, held up an authoritarian hand, level with Slide's chest, but not touching him. "What the fuck are you trying to pull now, punk?"

It had been a long time since Yancey Slide had been addressed by anyone as "punk", and even though the mistake was understandable, he could feel a demon ire rising inside him. The teardrop tattoo didn't worry him, but he still held his wrath in check. He did not wish to create an occurrence right there on the street, and thus resisted the impulse to fill these two minders-of-the-door with the double-

whammy horrors right there and then. "I'm here to see Doc Zen."

"Why should Doc Zen want to see a always-broke, scrounging-asswipe speedfreak like you?"

Still Slide refrained from imposing the full horrors, but also realized that to argue with the goons guarding the door of Art's Snooker was pointless. The simplest solution was to simply erase himself from their perception. If either of the goons had retained a memory of what had happened, they would have told everyone they knew how "fucking Johnny Yuma" had apparently turned into a heavy vapor, sunk to the sidewalk, and flowed past their feet into the entrance and on up the stairs. Of course, they would never do that. At the same time as erasing himself, he also wiped the memory from their minds. As far as the goons were concerned nothing had happened. Johnny Yuma had never been there or spoken to them. That was one of the advantages of being an idimmu. You could always fuck with the minds of humans if it made your life a little easier.

He resumed his human form halfway up the stairs to the second floor, and was Johnny Yuma again when he pushed through the double doors into the pool hall itself, reflecting on how he seemed to be rapidly reinforcing the first impression that stealing the body Johnny Yuma had been a very poor choice. The pool hall was nominally closed. Indeed, it had been nominally closed since Doc Zen had taken it over as his headquarters. The large room, with its twelve full size tables was dark save for a single light of one table in the far corner. Four men and two artificials were clustered around it, but their attention was entirely on a gilded California blonde, practiced and willowy, leaning over the pool table to make her shot. She was a bright blaze of irradiated gold in the Rembrandt whiskey haze of the pool hall's interior, a fluid symmetry between the electric blue halo above the pool table and verdant green of its surface. The solid colors of the balls clicked at the command of her stick. She tossed her mane at each fresh position, short shorts, long legs, and when she turned to dust her hands with talc and then chalked her cue before dispatching the frame, Slide could feel the Yuma-body stir with desire. The woman must have sensed something because she looked up, saw him, and gestured to Doc Zen who was her opponent in the game of eight ball.

Doc Zen had the powerfully sculpted features of a Roman Emperor, except he was a Roman Emperor with long grey hair pulled back into a ponytail and dressed in white linen suit from the days of river boat gamblers, a silver brocade vest, and matching sleeve garters on the arms of his black silk shirt. If that moment, his suit coat was hung carelessly over the back of a chair, and he leaned on a custom-made cue waiting for the blonde to finish her break. At the sight of what he also though was Johnny Yuma, he frowned angrily. "What are

you doing here Yuma? I thought I banned you."

Slide was really growing bored with all this mistaken identity. "Damn it, Doc. It's me, Slide."

Doc Zen's eyes narrowed. "Well so it is. What the fuck made you possess the body of a worthless fuckwit like wretched Johnny?"

"I was in something of a hurry."

"So it would seem."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Why don't you adapt the damn body to look more like yourself? You don't need to be carrying Yuma's penny-ante baggage around with you."

"Shape-taking takes time, and I only just got here."

"Time seems to be a major problem with you right now."

"Like I just said, what's that supposed to mean?"

"In a nutshell, my boy, someone's been walking on butterflies. And they're trying to put the blame for it squarely on you."

"Butterflies?"

The blonde had straightened up from the table, and Doc Zen put down his cue effectively suspending the game. "You know the old story. Guy rides a time machine a couple of million years into the past, and he steps in a butterfly on kills it. In the present, New York vanishes."

"Shit, Doc, I know the fucking story. What does it have to do with me?"

"A couple of entire dimensions have completely vanished?"

Slide was shocked. The news was monumental enough to move even his jaded sensibilities.

"Vanished?"

"To say they were even history would be an exaggeration. No more DZM displacement, not so much as a vestigial Q-bias."

"Fuck."

"That's one way of putting it."

"And they're blaming it on me?"

"Couldn't happen to a nicer person."

"Fuck."

"That's the second time you said that."

"All I did was take a powder from the Battle of the Fifteen Armies."

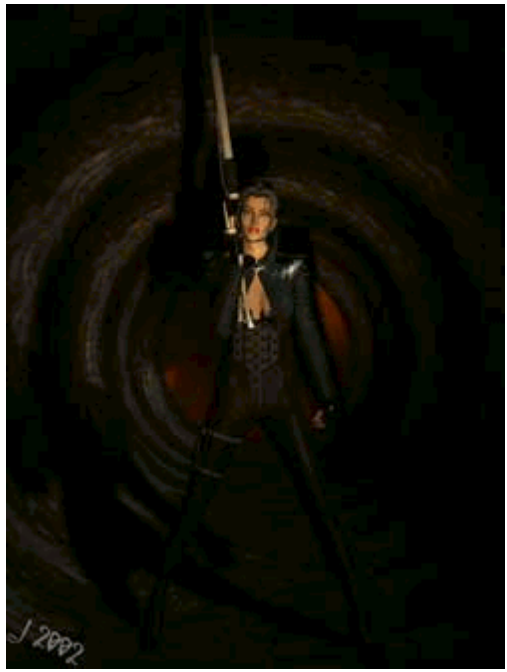
"That would seem to have been the cause of all the trouble. You were supposed to rally your men, turn the tide of the fight and save the day. When you didn't, much changed. Some things quite inexplicably. Even in this exactitude, the city of Baltimore blinked and found it had been taken by the Mole People."

"That's bullshit. You know I'm not the rallying kind, and I never save the day if I can in any way help it. I'm Yancey Slide goddamn it."

"You and I know may that know that it's bullshit, but the price on your head is downright flattering."

A voice suddenly came without warning from the gloom between the table and the door. "And that's a price I intend to be paid, Doc Zen, so I suggest that you and your people step away from Slide and let me take him and his valuable head."

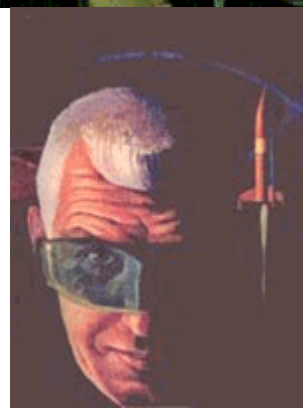
If a voice could be simultaneously melodic and threatening, Nuygen von Bulow's had that capability, and she had also appeared completely out of nowhere. The doors had not swung, light had not entered the dark pool hall, footfalls or the rap of high heels had not ascended the stairs or crossed the floor, and neither Slide nor Doc Zen, both of whom were, to say the least, watchful and cautious by nature, had noticed her enter. Nuygen von Bulow was still in her slight and oriental body mode, very much the way Slide had last seen her, the moment before he had made good his escape from the High Soviet Kremlin, forced to her knees, in bra, panties, and black opened toes shoes, in front of KGB Knight, blowing him at gunpoint. This time, however, her thin, almost emaciated frame was clad in a tailored riding habit of scarlet raw silk, buttoned high to the neck, but with the long skirt slit almost to the hip, so the black patent leather of the thigh-length and intricately laced boots flashed as she moved. Slide recalled that Nuygen had always indulged herself with dramatic footwear. Her eyes were hidden behind enigmatic, wraparound sunglasses, but no one needed to read her eyes to know her intentions were grimly serious.



In her gloved right hand, she held a needle gun from entirely the wrong century, and it was pointed at location halfway between Slide and Doc Zen so she could burn either with only the slightest of turns.

Her sole companion was a young male with the face of a oceanic predator, armored in a predictable latex skinsuit. He aimed a Mossberg pump, and wore the Dragon's Cross with Maple Clusters, and, as Slide looked down the barrel of the shotgun, he noted that the kid had to be far too young to be entitled to the decoration.

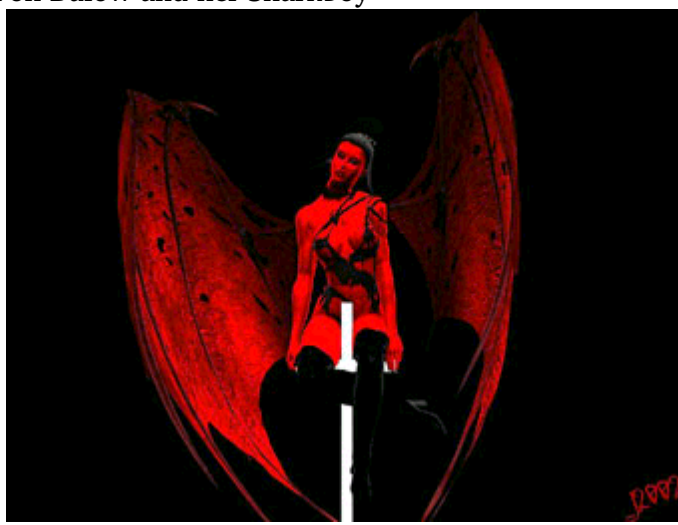
It took the blonde who had been shooting pool with Doc Zen to break the silence that had greeted von Bulow and her boy, and say what everyone else was thinking. "You know, Doc, I would love for someone to prove me wrong, but this does not look good at all."



Story so far: *On the lam from the Battle of the Fifteen Armies, Yancey Slide, Idimmu Demon of the Tenth Continuum, makes it to an Earth Urban C21, but with bounty hunters in hot pursuit. He appropriates the body of a speedfreak called Johnny Yuma, and seeks help from the legendary Doc Zen. Unfortunately, Slide has not moved fast enough among the all the random time variables, and his one time lover, but now implacable enemy, Nuygen von Bulow catches up with him at the pool hall where Doc Zen has made his home.*

Episode Four
Life On Mars?

The weapon-weight of the Desert Eagle he had taken from the Blimp was hard and metallic against Slide's back, but no way could he put a hand to the gun. Inside Art's Snooker, on the second floor, Nuygen von Bulow and her Sharkboy



sidekick totally had the drop on him. The exact nature of Nuygen von Bulow had always been a mystery to Slide. She was perhaps a succubus with ambition, or a mutant demon of a kind he had never previously encountered. On their first meeting, long parsecs in the past, aboard the ancient Moche airship, he had known she wasn't human, that was for sure, and later, in the perfumed confines of her private state room, she hadn't smelled demon either, but then the bomb planted by Good-time Charlie Christmas and his Sky Pirates had detonated, the airship had been blown clean in half, and he had been deprived of any further chance to investigate. In the present, the needle gun in Nuygen von Bulow's right hand, the breathy Hanoi street-edge in her voice, and the Mossberg toted by her boy companion told him that, whatever she might really be, he should move with extreme circumspection.

"I suggest that you and your people step away from Slide, and make no let or hindrance while we take him, and claim the completely outrageous price on his suddenly very valuable head."

Slide moved just slightly. "Perhaps, before we go any further, someone would like to explain to me why my head has quite so high a fucking price on it."

Nuygen von Bulow looked Slide up and down. "I would have taken you without any financial incentive, Yancey Slide. You've fucked with me too many times for me to feel anything but an extreme and unpleasant delight in watching you suffer all the way to your limits, and well beyond. I haven't forgotten what you did to me at the Kremlin."

Slide shrugged and raised his hands. "I know you and I have a somewhat problematic history, Nuygen, but I really would like to know why I've suddenly become so damned valuable."

Sharkboy hefted the shotgun and looked eagerly at von Bulow. Slide knew the kid wanted to blow someone apart so bad he could taste it. "He's just stalling, ma'am. Doc Zen gotta have filled him in already."

Despite the predicament, Slide was not only able to look Sharkboy directly in the eye, but also raise an amused eyebrow. "That shows how little you know of Doc Zen, kid."

Von Bulow glanced at Slide. "I think we know enough about Doc Zen to assume he's not going to get in the way when we take you out of here. Isn't that right, Doc?."

Zen moved further away from Slide, closer to the pool table. "I'm sorry, Yance, but you're just too damned hot to have around."

Slide's lip curled. "Thanks Doc. With friends like you, what the fuck do I need with parasites?"

Von Bulow gestured with the needle gun. "Are you going to come quietly?"

Before Slide could answer, the door to the stairs swung violently open, and two cops, in blue uniforms, and with drawn guns, squinting in the comparative darkness of the pool hall, were suddenly a new factor in the equation of showdown. "Everyone stand right where they are and don't move as much as a muscle."

In the first fraction of a second, all the players in the room froze as instructed, and the officers moved forward. "Put your hands on the back of your head, Yuma. Fingers laced."

As far as Slide could tell, Sharkboy was the first to break the deadlock brought about by this new Johnny Yuma problem. He turned with the clear intent of blowing away the intruding policemen. Slide was the second to join the play. The Desert Eagle was in his hand, and, without conscious thought, he fired the big .50 caliber automatic with a deafening report in the enclosed space. It was alleged that a bullet from a Desert Eagle could crack the engine block of a Mac truck. Sharkboy staggered forward with a massive wound in his back where the hollow point had torn into it. The cops, being mere humans, were no problem in terms of response. Compared with an idimmu at full stretch, they were infinitely slow. Nuygen was another

matter. She had the needle gun pointed straight at him. Although she couldn't kill him, she could have maimed him with a blast of razor-sharp steel micro-shards to the point that his immediate future would be exceedingly uncomfortable, complicated and immobile. Her hesitation stemmed from her not wanting him maimed. She wished him alive and walking, and ready to suffer at her hands, and in that small but crucial moment, as she was divided between desire for sweet revenge and practicality, Slide saw his chance.

He tossed her an illusion. Slide and Nuygen were suddenly somewhere else.

Balanced, legs braced like surfers, they were each on a flying disc about five feet in diameter, she was a buxom blonde in a bikini and boots, and he was a somewhat epicene young man, stripped to the waist, with a wide and studded Spartacus belt. The two of them were going at each other with long, snaking electric whips, and swords hung from their belts, that would supposedly come into play if they moved closer to each other. Slide had no idea where or when they were, but a vast and roaring crowd way below then indicated that they were the current attraction at some ultra-extreme, stadium sporting event. He knew he had never been in any situation or place like it before, and he could only assume the context of the vision had come from her memory rather than his. He still had the edge, however, having instigated the distracting phantasm. His whip shot sparks and coiled around von Bulow's knees and thighs, pulling her off

balance. For a moment, she screamed and teetered, and then began to plummet to the stadium below.

Slide cut the illusion as fast as he had started it and, back in Art's Snooker, his hand was around Nuygen's thin right wrist. He twisted, she cried out, and the needle gun went flying. The fifty caliber was up beside her head. Slide fired again, but she was not the target. Again the busting of the cap was a hazard to eardrums, but it was worse for the first native cop who went flying backwards, effectively headless, with blood, brains, and skull fragments sprayed over an elliptical area being him. Slide fired again, and the second cop replicated his companion's arc of final flight. Only then did he step back and place the muzzle of the huge automatic hard against Nuygen's left temple.

"So, my dear, what were you saying about taking my head?"

Slide could not recall ever seeing Nuygen von Bulow looking apprehensive before, and even then it only lasted for a split second. Her previous combination of loathing and contempt returned almost immediately. "I can't be killed."

Slide smiled unpleasantly. "I know that, but one of these hollow points could fuck you up royally for a while. You'd be living without a head."

Doc Zen moved towards the two of them. "Let her go Yancey."

"I don't know about that."

Doc ignored Slide. "Just get out of here, Nuygen. Walk out of here, back to you limo and your Humiliation, and don't say a word. Slide isn't going to shoot you."

"I'm not?"

Zen returned Slide's glance with a look of one who knows he will be calling the shots for there on in. "No, you're not. You have more than enough troubles already."

With a shrug, Slide withdrew the pistol and slid it into the back of his pants. "Whatever you say, Doc."

As Nuygen von Bulow walked stiffly to the door, the body of Sharkboy slowly dematerialized, fading to nothing and leaving no trace. When she was gone, with the double doors slapping behind her, Doc Zen whistled. "Man, she really had that kid in the full thrall. Even dead, he doesn't even exist without her."

The blonde who had been playing nine ball with Zen looked round the pool room with an expression of distaste. "This joint is really messed up."

Zen snapped his fingers. "Ernst, get a bucket and mop."

One of the synthetics scowled. "Why do I always have to do the grue-wipe?"

"You're a synthetic aren't you? Why else would I have acquired you."

"You don't have to rub it in.

The blonde sighed. "We've still got two dead cops here."

Doc Zen failed to catch the drift of her argument. "It's their own fault for walking in here when they did."

"Whoever might or might not be at fault, the bodies still have to be disposed of."

Now it was Zen's turn to shrug. "So someone will drive them out to the storm sewers and feed them to the CHUDs."

"CHUDs?"

"Cannibalistic Humanoid Underground Dwellers."

Slide blinked. "I didn't know you had CHUDs in this C21."

"How do you think we keep the Mole People at bay?"

Zen busied himself setting his team to work at cleaning up all evidence of the mayhem in the pool hall. Then, when everything in motion to his satisfaction, he slipped on his frock coat and turned his attention to Slide. "I guess you see by now that you can't possibly stay here. I'm not being inhospitable, but what just happened could become a constant condition of life if you stick around."

"I seem to be attracting more than my fair share of attention."

"What I mean is, old friend, that you have to get the fuck out of here like now. This minute."

Slide sighed. "I'm hardly in any shape to be leaping from one fucking dimension to the next with bounty hunters all around me. I'm telling you, Doc. I need a hole-in-the-wall for a spell of recuperation. If I have to lam out the hard way, it's only going to be a matter of time before one or more of them catches up to me. Then I'm for the Negative Zone or even the Edge of Entropy. If that's all I have to look forward to, I might as well make my last stand right here and save myself a whole mess of hard traveling."

Zen looked sideways at Slide. "You're threatening me? You're threatening me with deliberately staying and having a showdown right on my turf?"

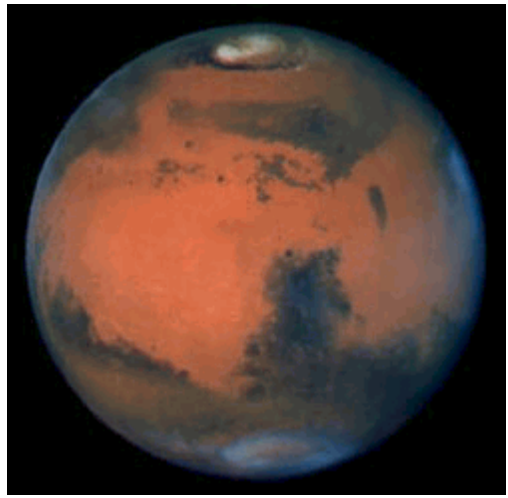
Slide shook his head. "No, man, I'm just tired, and it's the only card I have left to play…"

Doc Zen thought for a while. "Mars might be a good place to hole up."

"Mars? What the fuck are you talking about. There's nothing on Mars but rocks."

"Stop thinking so temporally, my boy. Eight million years ago Mars was fucking humming."

Slide frowned. Eight million years ago on a clearly defined Other Planet was a



stretch by any standard of reality-jump. He groped for what he recalled about Mars eight million years in the past. He was relieved when Doc Zen helped him out. "It was when The Slimy Things were tossing their time-cylinders full of fighting machines at Earth and Venus, and the Jedwars and warlords were fighting among themselves. The neo-Victorians are there already. They have themselves a nice little Raj going."

"I'm not sure it's what I'm looking for."

"You're not choosing a vacation, Yancey old son. You're looking for a place to hide. It would seem to be a point on the Martian timeline when they went about their own business without too much truck with Imperial entanglements. And besides, I heard that Miss Mina Murray is up there."

Slide's eyes narrowed. "Mina Murray that…"

"Mina Harker that was."

"She who mind melded with Count Dracula?"

Zen nodded with an express of inscrutable amusement. "The very same."

"No bullshit?"

"No bullshit."

"So they've got vampires up on Mars?"

"They're Victorians aren't they?"

They both knew how Slide felt about vampires. They both knew that Slide was intrigued, but form dictated he should raise one more objection. "How the fuck am I supposed to get to Mars in the shape I'm in? Not to mention the almighty goddamned timeleap."

Doc Zen trumped the problem "We have a Carter Machine out back."

"A Carter Machine?"

"Right."

Now Slide was really impressed. "Where the fuck did you get a Carter Machine?"

"I bought it from a traveling Gnostic who was a Dealer in Devices.

"You're kidding me?"

"How do you think I got Ernst and the other Hormad synthetics?"

Slide and Zen exited by a rear door and descended into a sub-basement by means of a freight elevator. Doc Zen's domicile was also larger on the inside than the out, and the basement was like that of a major museum, with irregular lines and groupings of large and dusty, drop-cloth shrouded objects, and long ranks of warehouse style selves on which the smaller items were stacked in piles. Doc Zen had a reputation for hoarding all manner of stuff and especially devices of arcane obscurity, and usually of little or no relevance to the time period in which he was residing. For a minute or more he stood frowning, as though unable to recollect where the hell he had put the damned thing. Then memory seemed to reassert itself. He walked with increasing confidence among the remarkable and extensive collection of junk, finally halting in front of something looked like a sheeted-up hotdog stand with its parasol still open. With a collector's pride, he whipped away the cover, revealing the umbrella canopy of a Gridley Wave generator above a comfortable 19th century style, padded leather armchair with a hinged set of brass and crystal controls that could be swung in front of the seated operator/passenger.

Slide stared at it a slightly bemused expression even for a demon who had seen most things. "That is definitely a Carter Machine."

"I just have to find the power source."

Doc Zen rummaged and eventually located a light absorbing cube that appeared uncomfortable in the relative space it occupied. Slide took a step back. "Is that what I think it is?"

"A simple little matter/anti-matter unit."

"You're messing round with matter/anti-matter in the middle of a highly populated city?

Doc Zen didn't seem at all concerned. "Fuck 'em if they can't take a cosmic joke. And anyway, I'm careful."

Slide seated himself in the chair of the Carter Machine, trying it for size, but, at the same time, he couldn't help remembering that, as far as his information went, the Carter Machine didn't have an exactly unblemished safety record. He had heard tales of how people had checked out under the spinning canopy but then never checked in again. "I'm still not sure I can do this without tetradetoxin, Doc."

Doc Zen's voice took on a tone of provoked impatience. "Fuck, Yancey, don't you ever stop creating problems? You seriously think Doc Zen is without tetradetoxin?

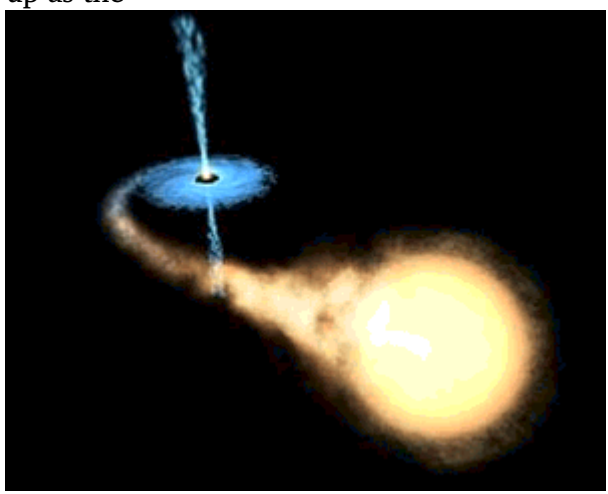
After Slide had been suitably drugged and otherwise prepared for

his departure through space and time, and deprived of his weapon because the Gridley Wave would never support even that mass of metal, Doc Zen leaned in and made sure his seat belt was securely fastened, and then stepped back to a safe distance. "The coordinates are all set. You need only to press forward on the main control lever."

Still Slide hesitated. "I don't know, Doc. I don't know about any of this."

"Fuck you, Yancey, get going, or I'll turn you in to the IIA myself."

With his brain now awash in tetradetoxin, Slide could only do as he was told and go. He pressed forward on the main control lever, and then looked up as the



canopy commenced to turn, allowing himself to be hypnotized by its accelerating rotation. Initially the hallucinations were routine, flapping wings leaving rainbow contrails, and stars streaming down the curvature of space-time like a sparkling mercury fountain, then, fleetingly, as the intergalactic dust clouds rushed past, he crossed the space lanes of the Great Ships of the Ancients, the star-hammers and death-asteroids in which the Shining Ones waged their majestic war on The Great Chalcedon, the Destroyer of Worlds, and he was hurried witness to the carnage and conflagration that resulted when the absolute masters of planetary systems, and the lords of vast gas nebulae clashed in a conflict that he knew would drag on for countless millennia. As he sped across a hundred or more million miles and eighty thousand human centuries, riding the impossible Gridley Wave like the course of the Starchild, he also briefly traversed the black vacuum ranges where the squid-like hydrogen feeders, conceived in the fiery afterbirth of the Big Bang, grazed on the void as they probably would all the way to an approximation of infinity, but then, in an instant he had entered quadrants of light and sound that were impossible to describe even for an idimmu, and where ethereal voices whispered galactic conspiracy in a language he had never encountered

before in all his long days, but whose tone was precise enough for Slide to recognize an overpowering evil intent.

When it came, his arrival at his destination was in abrupt and in untoward contrast to the strange and awesome magnificence of the transit. Without warning, he was slammed sideways into hard hot red sand with the force of a dead fall of maybe ten or fifteen feet. For an few moments, Yancey Slide lay stunned and winded, unable to accurately recognize so much as up, light headed in the thin atmosphere, and cautious to make his first move in the reduced gravity. He also realized very quickly that the Carter Machine had not landed with him, and neither had the clothes he had been wearing. He was as bare ass naked as a new born human, without so much as a shirt to cover himself, or any of the small and useful items he had secreted in his pockets before his departure from Doc Zen's. It was more that sufficient to cause him to curse out loud.

"Fuck this for unacceptable shit."

"You must have been extremely drunk."

"What?" The perfect incongruity of the shrill squeaky and over-sibilant voice, with it's slightly affected and decidedly campy English lisp, fitted with the rest of Slide's current predicament so exactly that he moved his head enough to observe that the speaker, was small, barely eighteen inches tall, and resembled a Maine lobster on spindly tripod legs.

"This far down the canal and bareass naked."

"What?"

"I said you must have been extremely drunk to get all this way out of town and lose your clothes into the bargain. You sure must have tied one on."

"Did you see how I got here?"

"No memory?"

Slide was getting tried of this crustacean assuming he was a mislaid drunk. "Just answer the question."

The lobster boy made a negatory gesture with a antennae. "No. I didn't see how you got here. You were fully here when I came sashaying by, out cold in your birthday suit."

"I came a long way to be here. All the fucking way from Earth."

"Are you telling me you're John Carter? Because, if you are, I'm flatly not going to believe you."

"I'm not John Carter, and neither am I Ulysses Paxton, but I arrived here by a similar means of transport."

"So welcome to Malecandra, or Barsoom, or Mars if you prefer it."

"Mars will do."

"My name is Mahdjfb.

"I'm pleased to meet you Mahdjfb. My named is Yancey Slide."

The tripod didn't seem to attache any significance to the name. "I'm afraid your only hope is to make it to the city.

"The city?

"The moons will be up soon and the banths and corphals will be out."

"What?"

"We could both end up as chow."

"What city are you talking about?"

"Extrosylvania."

"What?"

"City of Queen Mina."

"What?"

"Made herself Queen didn't she? After the assassination of Dejah Thoris by the Gorthans in Aaanthor Plaza. Made the place the capital of the Victorian Raj, and Claims she's last bastion of the vertebrates against The Slimy Things."

"But you're exoskeletal."

"That counts."

"It does?"

"The Victorians need all the help they can get, right now. If you've got a bone of any kind, they'll take you, even with those humorless fucking Treens growing a new Mekon in the their tanks."

Now Slide was really surprised. "You've got Treens here?"

"'Tis but a short hop from Venus. I mean, Mars and Venus really started talking after the attack of the Volan Hives from the Red Moon, and the fall of the 17th. Mekon."

"I'm starting to feel a little dizzy."

"There's no air plants this far out, dearie. You need to get back to the city."

"How do I do that?"

"You follow the Grand Canal for about ten clicks and you're there."

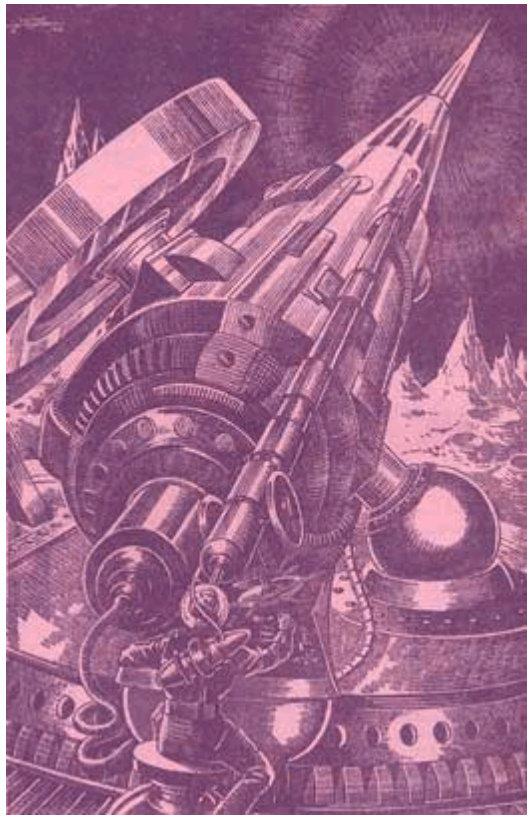
"What?"

"The Grand Canal. It's right beside you, for pity's sake. You really should take a look around at your immediate surroundings. What are you going to do when people ask you for your first impressions? Tell them you don't have any because you lay your back and stared straight up because like Snoopy on his doghouse because you didn't like the situation in which you found yourself?"

Mahdjfb seemed an excellent judge of the situation so Slide made the effort, struggled into a sitting position and looked to his right. And there was the Grand Canal. The Martian Grand Canal, for fuck sake. The legendary construction required a moment of pause, in which all thoughts of Slide's own ongoing predicament were temporarily driven

from his mind as he stared in unashamed awe. "Holy shit."

Essentially the canal was a vast trench that ran in a gentle curve to the orange horizon and beyond. It was maybe a half mile across, and lined with gargantuan slabs of raw, red and blue veined marble, each one flawlessly fitted to the others that surrounded it, without the use of cement of filler. No wonder that, millions of years in the future, the Grand Canal would still be visible from space when it was nothing more than a dry and eroded, ruined legacy. Its construction was the kind of public works project that usually followed long and monumentally epic wars. He could personally recall how many a mogul, and all descriptions of despots had redeployed their no longer required soldiers to labor dawn to dusk on some backbreaking wonder of the world in question. Sometimes it would be grandiose calendars or implausible tombs, but the first favorite was always a colossal irrigation project. And thus it had been with Ras Thavas and the Jeddaks of Thark after the Wars on Consolidation and the Time of the Flying Death. The newly arrived visitor might have anticipated bright flowing water in the canal, but that was not the case. Slide already knew the Martian canals held the water they moved from the poles to the equator enclosed in pipes, but no second hand weird tales of the Red Planet had prepared him for what he saw. Each pipe was maybe ten feet across, dark blue, and there were countless thousands of them.



He also would have expected that such a massed multitude of pipework to have been laid according to an orderly and geometric design, but these pipes undulated and intertwined, in and out, and over and under, and each individual one seemed to conform to what would have been the natural flow of the water in motion.

"I looks like the intestinal track of some gargantuan planet sized creature."

Mahdjfb fluttered his antennae. "In some respects it is, but we still drink the water."

Slide could only repeat himself. "Holy shit." He really was on Mars, sometime in the Golden Age, and no matter how jaded he might have become, that was something that could not be easily taken as routine.

Mahdjfb, however, was becoming snippy and impatient. "I know you're impressed with your first sight of the Grand canal, but you really do have to start for the city."

"Could you show me the way?"

"Yes, yes, I'm going that way, but we must hurry."

"The banths and corphals will be out?"

"At least you remember what you're told."

Slide got slowly his feet. "Okay, Mahdjfb. Lead the fucking way.

He reflected, however, as he started following the crustacean that a naked man walking into a Victorian city might receive a very mixed reception.

Story so far: *Pursued by bounty hunters after his desertion from the Battle of the Fifteen Armies, and with the backstory already starting to distort around him, Yancey Slide, Idimmu Demon of the Tenth Continuum, escapes in Doc Zen's Carter Machine and arrives on ancient Mars some eight million years in the past. Unfortunately, Slide find himself unceremoniously dumped by the Gridley Wave on the sands of the Red Planet, devoid of clothing and personal effects.*

Episode Five
The Establishment of Mrs. Rosa Coote

The Establishment of Mrs. Rosa Coote turned out to be a pillared edifice at the end of a long drive, through wrought iron gates that stood wide open and were studded with electric sparkles. The house itself was lit by gas jets and radium bulbs, and glowed like some garish Las Vegas counterfeit of Victorian England. Patrons arrived by steam cab, Martian ornithopter, and ornamental flying belts that Yancey Slide would later learn were manufactured under Royal patent and went by the brand-name Equilibrimotors. As Slide walked up the driveway, he saw that, in front of the main entrance, a line of paired Pony girls waited with their Amazon drivers, secure in the traces of lightweight, skeletally A-frame chariots, ready to carry passengers on exotic excursions through the fabricated arbors of the wholly fabricated parkland. The girls were skittish and pouting, long legged in absurdly platformed and beribboned in their Dadaist sandals, and they turned high-held heads to stare at potential fares with ball-gag muted resentment, each pair knowing that as soon as a passenger climbed aboard, or a couple, or even threesome in the low Martian gravity, the stern-driving Amazon would mercilessly crack the whip, and, smarting and stinging, they would set off at a run, pulling the chariot, forced to prance, knees impossibly high, by the heels of their surreal shoes. In due course, when drinking in the back bar of the Ferret and Spectacles with some off-duty Pony girls, talkative before turning fighting drunk, he would learn that most of those who served under the lash and between the shafts were indentured servants, in the sex business rather than the diamond mines of Gathol, good-looking, but foul-mouthed, convicted dollymops loose without papers, but a few were incognito ladies of class who actually paid, or had their husbands pay, for the chastening servility of the harness.

As it had turned out, Slide had not been required to enter the city Extrosylvania, of which the Establishment of Mrs. Rosa Coote was a well known attraction, as buck naked as he had arrived on Mars. Once the decision had been made to head for the city, he and the crustacean Mahdjfb had walked in silence for a long time, following the slowly curving line of the Grand Canal, while the small tripod nervously scanned the horizon for the rising of the moons and the coming of the predator banths and the even more hideous corphals. As the wonder of the Grand Canal wore off, Slide found there was very little to look at until, way in the distance, he had spotted three objects on the other side of the canal where the peak of the huge volcano Olympus Mons

rose from beyond the horizon. As best he could judge distance on this new planet, Slide figured the things had to be well over thirty feet high, and looked like giant three-legged relatives of Mahdjfb, clad in complex steel armor. Slide had glanced at the little crustacean. "What the hell are those things?"

Mahdjfb swivelled the stalks of his eyes, and his antennae vibrated with what Slide read as disgust. "They are a Trinity of Slimy Things fighting machines. Normally they don't come all the way to this side of Olympus Mons, but they must be feeling bold. Mercifully they never cross the Grand Canal. They have that problem with water."

"I thought the Slimy Things were the enemy."

"They are the enemy."

"But those things look exactly like you."

Mahdjfb's antennae shook angrily. "They do not!"

Slide, having no clothes was completely insensitive to Mahdjfb's feeling and laughed. "They do, man. They look just like you, only much bigger and metallic."

"No they don't."

"Sure they do."

"Don't say that."

"I'm offending you?"

"Of course you're bloody offending me. As if it wasn't bad enough to have had the Slimy Things steal your basic natural design for their damned machines, there are species who like to accuse us of collaboration in the theft. Goddamn it, man, my kind, the Fygglhgis, were here before any of them. There are some bastards, usually human, who try to blame the worst of the Slimy Things outrages on us just because we look like their walking weapons. Can you imagine how it feels to be held responsible by a gang of drunks for the heat-ray destruction of New Jersey?"

Slide now knew that he had touched a nerve in his new-found guide, and he

resolved to say nothing until Mahdjfb had cooled down, which was just as well because, a short time later, the answer to his clothing problem materialized in the form of a thoat and rider drinking at one of the crystal fountains that were provided at regular intervals along the banks of the Grand Canal for exactly that purpose. The meeting could only have been a happy paradigm of Idimmu Blind Luck; happy for Slide, at least, while somewhat disastrous for the mounted traveler. Slide obviously had nothing against this total stranger, but he still, and with hesitation, employed a high-test demon mindfuck to batter the unfortunate into unconscious helplessness. While ignoring Mahdjfb's indignant protests that what Slide was doing could not be considered anything but out-and-out daylight robbery, and a felony as well, Slide had stripped off the man's clothing, which, by another stroke of demon good fortune fitted him exactly. Except for the boots, that is, and the feet of his borrowed body had to be contracted somewhat to squeeze into them. In addition to the long duster coat, embroidered vest, riding breeches, and a very serviceable cotton shirt, the robbery yielded a fat purse of gold jimmy o'goblins, straight out of the 19th century British Empire, and a long barreled and very Martian radium revolver. Slide noticed the Victorian presence on Mars was already starting to get to him. He was already using phrases like "happy paradigm".

"You really ought not to be doing that."

But Slide was already dressing. "I rationalize it that my need was greater than his."

"From the look of those sunglasses, the belt buckle, and the triangular sideburns, he was a traveler on his way to where the Elvis People are carving that great ridiculous face out of the solid mountain."

"So?"

"So they have religious protection under the treaty."

Slide sighed. He had a few very minor qualms of his own about robbing the religious. There was always the chance that their god might prove real and wreck retribution. "I tell you what I'll do. I'll leave him his thoat, his skivvies, his sunglasses, and also his belt buckle, as a token of his faith. Then, when he awakes, his trusty, eight legged Martian steed would still be with him and, although his clothes, weapon and money will be gone, his underwear should leave him with a modicum of dignity. I sometimes think these religious assholes like being set on and victimized in their devotions."

Even at a distance, Slide could see that the City of Extrosylvania had its own weather; rain showers and Sherlock Holmes fog that struck Slide as an unforgivably profligate use of water on a desert planet, that could only have raised a sullen resentment among the natives, and as they came closer, he saw that it stood under a dome formed by some kind of force field. The Victorians could be close to unbelievable in the way that they felt compelled to make everything resemble their own less-than-precise memories of what they believed they had left behind.

"Once we get close to the city, it would probably be a good idea if we split up and made like we didn't know each other."

With this, Mahdjfb took Slide totally by surprise. Why should the tripod not want to be seen with him? Was it the robbery of the thoat rider? "What did I do now?"

"Nothing except look humanoid. We could run into humanoid groups like the Red Knights of Issus and the Silver Legion who are wholly dedicated to the idea of segregation. Better if, when we come to the walls of the city, you went in one gate, and I went in another."

Extrosylvania was smoothly mediaeval, with a touch of deco-futurism in the way that it was walled and gated, and, confirming what Mahdjfb had said before taking his leave, a group of surly toughs stood hard beside the circular city gate, holding picket signs that read "FYGGLHGIS, DON'T LET THE SUN SET ON YOU, SHELL-BOY!" Having been warned that this might not be the City of Brotherly Love, Slide did not do the obvious and follow the main axial boulevard that led to the eventual hub of the essentially circular city, where the Turquoise Tower, the home of Queen Mina rose to the heavens. Instead, sought the narrow and less than fragrant prole alleys of the outer city. Although a stranger, he recognized these roughneck passages from a thousand other cities of his acquaintance, and knew they were an ideal haven of anonymity. The long Martian night was falling, and the souks were filling with half-shilling doxies, and penny panhandlers, street arabs, ragamuffins and guttersnipes, roughnecks,

rowdies and ruffians, all out for the cutter, and maybe some mischief and malarkey on the side. Yobboes in stripped jerseys loitered with plain intent, and slick silk-suited MacHeaths with diamond stick-pins, and Red Martian minders checked on their holding. Fakirs and Therns played their mystic sleight of hand, and through open arches and from behind closed doors, the underworld of the underclass pulsed with the rough rhythms of human weakness.

One blind pig offered absinthe and laudanum, a green door was calligraphed with the universal sign for an opium retreat, while a pub with dirty yellow light behind its windows made its more simple purpose known with a sign that read PENNY DRUNK - TUPPENCE BLIND DRUNK. He heard the roar of the crowd at a bare-fist boxing match where Norm "Pine" Norton was supposedly taking on all comers, and he passed a street corner political meeting at which a whey-faced young man with long lank cowlick and a pencil moustache harangued a hurly of burly totalitarians holding black and silver flags; presumably the Silver Legion of which Mahdjfb had spoken. A certain temptation gnawed at Slide to simply vanish into the namelessness of the lower orders. He could sure as shit hold his own among the footpads and cutpurses, and be relieved not to find himself constantly involved in high designs and conspiratorial machinations, or taking the rap for changes in the historical text over which, in reality, he had absolutely no control. He knew, however, that this was an impossibility. Slide was idimmu through and through and sooner or later he would do something rash and flashy himself framed as a sequel to Jack the Ripper. He had taken the measure of Skid Row, and now it was time to move up the social scale. Being flush with his stolen loot, he tossed a coin to a passing trollop and did his best to sound Victorian. "A moment of your time, my proud beauty."

The trollop, who would have cleaned up quite nicely, assayed the coin of the realm between her teeth and winked. "This here jimmy will buy you a bit more than a minute, guv."

"I just need some directions."

"I've never heard it put like that before."

"What's the toff's top knocking shop in this town?"

The trollop though for a moment. "Sophia's Cabaret is what you might call the class, but you need some real cutter to get in there. And may I ask what's wrong with me, milord? I could show you as good a time as any stuck up tart at Sophia's, and for a quarter the price."

"I'm sure you could, but I have other need's right now."

"Well fuck you too for la-dee-dah."

Slide ignored her pouting. "So Sophie's is the place?"

"Unless you count Mrs Coote's, but that's not really what you'd call a knocking shop. A bit more…what's the word? You know? Pony

girls and the like?"

"Esoteric?"

"Esoteric. You're a fucking scholar, guv, and no mistake."

Slide nodded. "Rosa Coote's sounds like the place. How do I get there?"

"Gawd luv ya, that's the easy part. Helium Boulevard to Thark Lane. That brings you to Albert Park, and it's inside the park at the top of the hill. You can't miss it. Whether they'll let you in like that is another matter, though." And thus Yancey Slide arrived at the Establishment of Mrs Rosa Coote, and, after allowing himself a few moments of silent inspection, started up the driveway in the direction of the house that glowed and glittered like a twentieth century Christmas tree, and seemed to attract a passing crowd who indicated that a taste for the trollop had called "esoteric" was highly fashionable among the smart, wealthy, and well dressed of Extrosylvania. He walked in the wake of a short, squat, middle-aged man in top hat, white tie and tails, who walked with a silver topped cane, and sported a young, willowy and extremely expensive brunette on his arm. The couple moved to one side as a pair of pony girls, running under the lash, swept past with their chariot. The willowy brunette watched them go, and then turned to her companion. "I trust you don't desire me to so perform? Perhaps in private, but, out here for all to see…"

The squat man patted her hand. "Of course not my love. Although, inside Mrs Coote's much of what is normally so deliciously private is even more deliciously revealed."

Slide would have listened to their conversation further if two Red Martians, tall, muscular, and totally hairless humanoids, in para-military livery, had not placed themselves in front of him, barring his way.

"Can we help you, sir?"

"Do I present a problem?"

"There is a dress code, sir."

Slide had overlooked how Victorian snobbery was so much a matter of dress and manners. Amid all the eveningwear, he looked as though he had just ridden in from the wilds which, indeed, he had. Slide could only counter with attitude, some hastily palmed sovereigns, and whiff of idimmu suggestion. "I assure you, gentlemen, I do not present myself as a guest. I have urgent business with Mrs. Coote."

This combination seemed to be enough. The Red Martians pocketed their bribe with odd winks of their compound eyes. "Go round to the back door. They may give your story a listen."

The Red Martians on the back door proved a lot less receptive, even with their orange palms well-crossed with gold. "Sorry, sir. Mrs

Coote isn't seeing anyone right now."

Slide might have been forced to resort to more serious persuasion had not a determined female voice echoed from inside. "Wait a moment. Did I hear aright the name of Yancey Slide?"

A formidable woman, voluptuousness in black satin over dangerous corsets, and who greatly reminded Slide of the notorious Mesalina, the wife of the Emperor Claudius, appeared in the doorway. "Mac me for a two-bob, it really is Yancey Slide."

"I fear you have the advantage of me, Mrs. Coote."

"Take a real good demon look, Mr. Slide."

In an instant, Slide knew, but before he could speak, Rosa Coote laid a warning finger on his lips. "Not here, my dear. Don't ever speak my real name in this place, or the walls really will come tumbling down."

On other timelines, and in other bodies, Rosa Coote had been a free roaming lilith, a friend of his long time succubus lover Nephradana, who had been mysteriously missing for some time, and Slide suspected was with Hassan IX. Clearly, like himself, Rosa had come to Mars in this ancient era of Victorian occupation to conceal her real nature and, he could only presume, find expedient refuge from some complication in the more mainstream dimensions. Of all Nephradana's galatrix running girls, the one now called Rosa Coote had always been a favorite of Slide's, and apparently the feeling was reciprocated, since she immediately whisked him into a private, wood paneled office where she poured him a brandy, them lit cigars for both of them. "Finest Red Cuban, darling. Complete with dear old Che on the band. Wrap your laughing gear around that. You look like you've been ridden hard."

Outside the half open door, a stairway parade came and went; ladies, gentleman, human harlots, and Green Martian hostesses of all three genders, in their traditional costumes and body paint, back and forth from the upper more intimate levels of the house, while, inside, Slide and Rosa Coote smoked their cigars and drank brandy, while Rosa explained how she had promoted herself to the Victorians of Mars as the ideal hot hostess for Extrosylvania high society, but she avoided any explanation of why she had come there in the first place. "I mean, it's not totally to my personal taste, all this. They put far too much emphasis on all the whips and girlishness." She glanced at a small diamond wristlet watch. "But I can't stay here chatting all night. Tonight's tableaux is already underway."

"Tableaux?"

"This evening's show is called The Beneficial Chastisement of Wayward Gentlewomen."

"No shit? Live action pornography?"

"They're Victorian's, Slide. What the fuck else do you expect? You should see them on Gentlemen's Smoking Night."

"Indeed."

"So come and watch."

"Your doormen seemed to think that I was dressed too cowboy."

"You're with me, ain't you, Yancey? Nobody is going to say a word while you're with Rosa."

She led Slide into a large, and crowded room, gaslight dim, and with a comfortable pall of cigar smoke, and vintage perfume. The men were dressed formally, but the majority of the women had not only come to see the show, but, as Ovid had once remarked, to make a show of themselves. Tantalizingly laced or suggestive in silk, with plunging decolletage, many were young trophies, mistresses and acquisitions, but a few were clearly more mature lady libertines, who smoked cheroots and gold tipped cigarettes with a knowing, heavy-

lidded experience, and lace-gloved expertise. The deep, upholstered chairs and the roman style couches, and more conventional banquets, and the well fed reclining cushions endowed the place with a opulence that was part salon, part nightclub, and in part the lounge of one of the best appointed whorehouses Slide had ever visited. The tall water pipes on the tables among the brandy snifters, and martini glasses, the absinthe sets, vodka coolers, and chilling champagne, reminded Slide of the Le Club des Hachichins at the Hotel de Lauzun, in another time, but of an equally baroque decadence.

The tableaux de jour was in the center of the room, lit by a pair of electric spotlamps in the luxury gloom. A pale blonde, fragile of face, but with a bottom that made Slide's borrowed body sit up and take notice, despite all the reshaping and tetradetoxin, was being held naked and face down on a nightclub table by two of the burly Red Martians, who seemed to do most of Rosa Coote's muscle-work. They wore their livery britches and polished boots, but were stripped to the waist with crimson torsos theatrically oiled. They stood, one on either side of the nude woman, holding her arms outstretched. Heavy, twelve-fingered, Martian hands grasped her by the wrists and pinned down her shoulders. The Martians also made sure that they allowed enough room for a stern and muscular woman in traditional games-mistress attire to have a unimpeded arc of swing with a slim, ribbon-bound whip-bundle of gin-steeped birch boughs, with which she was resolutely beating the bare blonde. Each of the slow and measured strokes created a fresh addition to the crisscross pattern of welts on the white flesh of the pert, already noted bottom, that, with each fresh stripe, wriggled prettily, while she it's owner gritted her teeth, kicked her slender legs, and gasped. Her punisheress had loosened her narrow tie, removed the stud from her starched collar, and rolled back the sleeves of her man's white shirt, revealing that the powerful arm that administered the protracted and measured thrashing with such precise and meticulous effect was in fact a steel and copper prosthetic that, with a mechanical elaboration of pulleys, and pneumatic tubes and valves, seemed to operate quite as well, if not better than the real thing.

Rosa leaned close to Slide and whispered. "Our dear Miss Crabtree lost her arm in her wild youth when she went a bit native and ran off with the Black Pirates of Kamtol."

Slide puffed on his cigar. "Indeed." He was starting to believe that Extrosylvania might be a place where a demon could hide for a while, despite his misgivings back at Doc Zen's.

After a fifteen full and painful, stinging birch strokes, the squirming victim cried out with a high and lispingly theatricality. "Oh! Oh, Richard! I beg and implore you. I swear I will be a good girl in the future. Oh please, my love! My painful lesson is quite learned. Oh, tell the remorseless Miss Crabtree to stay the birch! Tell her to put up the instrument. Enough is enough. I am well whipped and abjectly repentant. I plead, Richard,…oh! for pity's sake…I plead to be flogged no more!"

The naked blonde's entreaties were a little too rehearsed to be altogether plausible, and certainly did not seem to evoke any pity in the tall dark aristocrat who sat at the other end of the table. He was a distinguished figure in frock coat, muttonchop side-whiskers, and a monocle, and as he took in the flagellation from what was clearly the best seat in the house, one hand held a cigar and a brandy glass, and the other caressed the velvet scalp of Green hostess who knelt at his knees and served him.

Rosa leaned close to Slide and whispered. "That's Captain Sir Richard Pendragon Barton, the Queen's Special Agent getting his joint copped by the Green, while the one getting her rump warmed is his current mistress Miss Harriet Marwood. Usually she has the whip hand, so to speak, but they must have contracted for some ringing of the changes tonight."

"This isn't how they normally carry on?"

Rosa shook her head. "Oh dear me no. I have it on good authority that, in the boudoir, it is the good Sir Richard who regularly bares his bum to the lash, arse-up, groveling, and loving it."

"On good authority?"

"Many a time I have sent girls over to assist in their tea-dance

debauchery."

"And how does the Queen feel about her Special Agent being the bum-striped whipping boy in private life."

"She totally ignores it. Queen Mina is above such things. Fancies herself as a philosopher queen, she does. Even though she was once little better than Dracula's whore. Plus he's far too good at his trade, our Captain Dick, to have to contain himself in private. Barton may be a stone libertine and godless masochist, but don't underestimate him, Slide. There's some who say, despite being so deep into the now-track, and in the pay of the Turquoise Tower, and also tight with some of our nastier local upstarts like the Silver Legion and the Red Knights, he keeps a link to Imperial Intelligence, and might even be full IIA."

"The IIA has agents this far out?"

"All the things are relative."

Slide nodded. "I guess so." He pointed in the direction of two men sitting next to Barton, one who simply watched, while the other made sketches in a small note book. "And who are they? A couple of his operatives?"

Rosa shook her head. "All I know is that they are new in town and call themselves Mr. Moore and Mr. O'Neill."

"And what about the one behind, the big, bullnecked character with the slouch hat pulled down over his face?"

"I know even less about him. He only arrived today, a little before you did. He has a Italian accent, and goes by the name of Nightshade. And I could swear he smelled of vampire."

Before Slide could quiz Rosa further about either Nightshade or Mr. Moore and Mr. O'Neill, the birch once more swished and stung and Miss Harriet Marwood cried yet out again. "Oh Richard, my lord, my love. Say I have been punished enough. My tender extremity now throbs beyond endurance."

This time the melodrama was greeted by some chuckles from the crowd, and even Sir Richard Barton slowly smiled. "I'm sorry, my dear, but you know I have to be deaf to your entreaties, no matter how tearfully moving. That was part of the bargain."

Now a ripple of approval went round the room, and Barton clearly played to the crowd. "I would suggest you ask Miss Crabtree to lay on five more, five more stripes to the weave of your striations, as a penalty for speaking up too soon."

Harriet Marwood's voice completely changed. It dropped and octave and snarled more naturally. "Damn you, Richard. Do I have to bleed fo you, and in public?"

Barton sipped his brandy. "Such was the agreement when you lost the bet." He glanced towards where Rosa stood beside Slide in the

back of the room. "I think Mrs Coote will confirm that."

Rosa Coote laughed, clearly happy to play the recognized referee in these evening sports of the upper orders. "That was the deal Captain Dick. All signed and sealing and on a paper in my safe. I believe 'thrashed beyond all sentimental mercy' were the words used and agreed."

For a moment, Barton looked directly at Slide and slight frown crossed his face, as though he had sensed something, but then Harriet Marwood snarled angrily, redirecting his attention. "Damn you again, Richard. Damn you to hell."

"Behave yourself, Harriet. You have an audience. The game must be played out."

"Oh very well." Marwood resumed the lisping theatre of the sweet girlish soprano. "Please Miss Crabtree, may I have five more, please?"

Miss Crabtree gestured curtly to the Red Martians, who had momentarily relaxed sufficiently for Marwood to raise her head, and speak. Again the bare shoulders were pressed down so her face was turned, cheek hard against the table. Miss Crabtree flexed her mechanical arm, then the flexible birch fell again causing the smarting recipient to jerk and squeal with a decided sincerity. Barton watched the next three cuts of the birch, but on the fourth he turned and again glanced in the direction of Rosa Coote and Slide, and, this time, his eyes lingered on him as though Slide posed a question, or presented something of a puzzle. The radium revolver under Slide's coat was a comfort, although perhaps not that much of one.

Story so far:*Having deserted from the Battle of the Fifteen Armies, and with the backstory fast distorting around him, Yancey Slide, Idimmu Demon of the Tenth Continuum, arrives on ancient Mars via Doc Zen's Carter Machine, only to discover that a coterie of extraordinarily perverse neo-Victorians have established a faux-British Raj on the Red Planet.*

Episode Six
An Encounter In Albert Park

Slide walked slowly along a bridle path, through the leafy fabrications of the park, away from the lights of the Establishment of Rosa Coote, sauntering somewhat, taking his time, but still watching his surroundings with some caution. Every now and again, pony girls would clatter by with ardently embracing lovers riding behind them, and he also had stepped prudently aside when an aloof company Red Martian lancers rode ponderously past, harness jingling, sabers rattling, the plumes on the their turbans bobbing, and their thoats snorting at being held so tightly in check. The Victorians liked to parade their ceremonial military presence. He had bid farewell to Rosa before taking his leave of her establishment, and promised he that he would call on her in a day or so. Prior to his departure, he had spent some hours of distraction in the private company of an enthusiastic brace of Green Martian hostesses provided, on the house, by Rosa. Private had seemed preferable to remaining in the main salon. His encounter with Sir Richard Barton had been enough to tell him that, in his dust-streaked duster coat, and with his off-world, demon ways, he was making himself a far too obvious outsider amid a gathering of the Extrosylvanian elite indulging in semi-public depravity.

When Miss Harriet Marwood's painful birching was finally completed, the oiled Red Martians had released her, then indoor pony girls draped her in a blue silk robe, to cover her smarting stripes, and assisted from the room. With the show concluded, Barton had risen to his feet, as if he intended to follow his mistress to some rear dressing room or antechamber, but, before doing that, he had discreetly, but very deliberately walked by Yancey Slide.

"I sense you carry a gun, sir."

"Do you now?"

"A radium revolver, if I'm not mistaken."

Slide's voice was chill. No side-whiskered Victorian, no matter how well connected, was going to intimidate him. "You would appear very perceptive, sir. Especially from across a crowded room with so much else going on."

"Are you a hired assassin or perhaps a Continental Operative? Slide dismissed the question as though it was of little importance. "Neither, at this particular moment."

"Maybe in the pay of our local Gorthan Assassins?"

Slide made a stiff gesture of ronin denial. "In no one's pay, I

assure you." "But you felt the need to arm yourself?"

"Let's say the weapon came with the package."

"That must have been an interesting package."

"Not particularly. I suppose it depends on your perspective."

"I didn't catch your name, sir."

"I didn't release it to be caught, Sir Richard."

Barton had looked bleakly at Slide, and drew hard on his cigar. Rosa Coote quickly intervened and made a fast introduction. The two men shook hands, and Barton's smile was courteous but, at the same time, hard eyed as he excused himself. "Right now, Miss Marwood is expecting me, and I cannot keep her waiting after all that she has been through, and, indeed, neither would I want to. I suspect, however, we will be meeting again, Mr. Slide."

Slide had nodded, knowing that a kind of unspoken challenge had been issued, but to what exactly he wasn't sure. All he knew was that Barton intended to make the predicted meeting happen. "I will look forward to it, Sir Richard."

"You do that, Mr. Slide. You do that."

After the exchange, Rosa had made it clear that it was not a good idea for Slide to be loitering in the public rooms of her Establishment. She wanted to stash him, with suitable means of amusement, in some more private sector of the house. Slide was in total agreement with that, if perhaps for different reasons. The two Green Martian hostesses, with their flexibility, ingenuity, wanton zealousness and, of course, those extra Martian orifices, would divert the body allowing the essential Idimmu, that was the core of Slide, to float free to the place of abstraction where his demon essence could, for the duration of the stoned and physical games, find an untroubled, demon stability. After all the drugs, and its prodigious journey across space and time, Slide's adopted body

now bore little resemblance to the long gone Johnny Yuma, and was rapidly taking on the Slide more standard gaunt features. Nothing, however, was able to change the unconscious tactile memories contained in the cadaver's Orlac cells, and these urged it first to load up on the local advanced opiates, hallucinogenics, and then drift sideways, delightedly responding to the attentions of the two nubile Martians, who caressed extraordinary local stimulants into the body's eagerly receptive cells, some of which were actually secreted from their own lewd flesh, and then continued to work on him with hands, multiple tongues and other extremities, practicing extreme and vigorous obscenity until the body writhed and screamed, exactly echoing their own alien passion howls as the three way coupling rose to a climax.

When all was done, Slide returned to ex-Yuma body. He dismissed the hostesses and dressed for the world outside. The temptation was simply to remain at Rose Coote's establishment as long as she would endure him as a guest, but, once again, his demon curiosity got the better of him. The body wanted to sleep, but Slide would not be dictated to by any annexed carcass and its imagined needs. He wanted to see more of this strange human city set down in an ancient Martian landscape, and that was how a further half hour found him walking in Albert Park, approaching a grove of faux-oaks, and a small stone henge-circle of modern fabrication that had been rather poorly distressed to make it resemble an ancient ruin. The structure would have fooled no one who had ever seen the real thing, and Slide assumed it was a pretentiously decorative folly, until he read the

discreetly engraved bronze sign attached to one of the megaliths that claimed it as the property and sacred place of the Victorian Order of Martian Druids. Slide hoped he would be spared having to meet the VO of MD. They would not be dangerous, but, as a self-respecting demon, he had no desire to bored to distraction by occult whimsey.

Slide was about to leave the fake henge when he felt the movement, a motion quite beyond his human senses, but with the resonance of a solid mass to his demon perceptions. What gave him paused was the inability of his demon perceptions to pinpoint location of this mass. He immediately went on the searching defensive, but still didn't catch the intrusion until it suddenly appeared in the form of a supposedly human figure, bullnecked and powerful, dressed in a flowing black overcoat and slouch hat.

"Hold up there, daemon."

Slide halted and turned to face the intruder. He might look like a man, but Slide knew instinctively that it was no more human than he. A human was unable simply to appear out of nowhere with quite such a supernatural sense of drama, and no human could conjure the ground fog that was suddenly drifting between the trees and around the megaliths of the stone circle, and certainly no human could recognized Slide as a demon in a man's body quite so easily. He been both made and surprised, and that was not good. No choice but the bluster.

"And who might you be? You don't look like any Druid. Even a Martian druid."

The figure moved closer. "You don't know me?" In fact, Slide did know the figure, after a fashion, or at least he thought he did. It greatly resembled the man at Rosa Coote's, sitting behind Sir Richard Barton, the one who Rosa had pointed out as Nightshade, and had said smelled of vampire. Was Barton so advanced that the had the undead in his employ and had sent this one to waylay Slide?

"I don't believe I've had the pleasure."

"But I think you know me."

Slide was stunned. Now he could smell vampire, and it was all he needed to trigger the recall. His full idimmu memory was vast, but made complicated by infinite dimensional levels and the relativity of time. The result was that large accumulations of data went ignored and unnoticed for sometimes subjective centuries at a stretch, until a random nudge brought long buried facts to the

conscious surface. Nightshade. More fully Joey Nightshade. The entity was also known Lupo Leomonte, sometimes Lupo Rieti. In other contexts, he was Vincent Satrielli. He was a vampire, one of the colony led by the formidable Victor Renquist, by all accounts with a career of bloody assassination that went back to the Italian Renaissance. All that Slide knew told him that such a being had no such business on Mars at all, let alone eight million years in his own linear past.

"You are Nightshade?"

"I prefer the simple Lupo."

Slide made a routine demon-to-vampire ward-off pass with his right hand, more to indicate that he had made this Nightshade, just as this Nightshade had made him, than as a gesture of protection. "I didn't know they had vampires on Mars?"

"I would rather you used the word "nosferatu". It's connotations are less negative."

"I'll try and remember that. I also don't like the term daemon."

Lupo bowed in sardonic acknowledgment. "Then we must try and respect each other's sensitivities."

"I am still surprise that a nosferatu should come to Mars."

"Normally we don't, but She of Fable requested our presence and made it possible."

"She of Fable?"

"The queen of this…place. The former Wilhelmina Murray, and the wife of the Slayer Harker. She that was the consort of Count Dracula." Lupo did not sound as though he exactly approved of Mars. Or Harker, or Count Dracula either.

"And you just arrived here?

Lupo nodded. "By the same method as you yourself used, demon."

A mind reading vampire? How else could Lupo know how Slide had come to Mars? He let that go for a moment, however, simply contracting his mind and vampire-perceived aura locking them both

down beyond the reach of any Nosferatu psychic delving. "A Carter Machine?"

"I believe that was the name of the device."

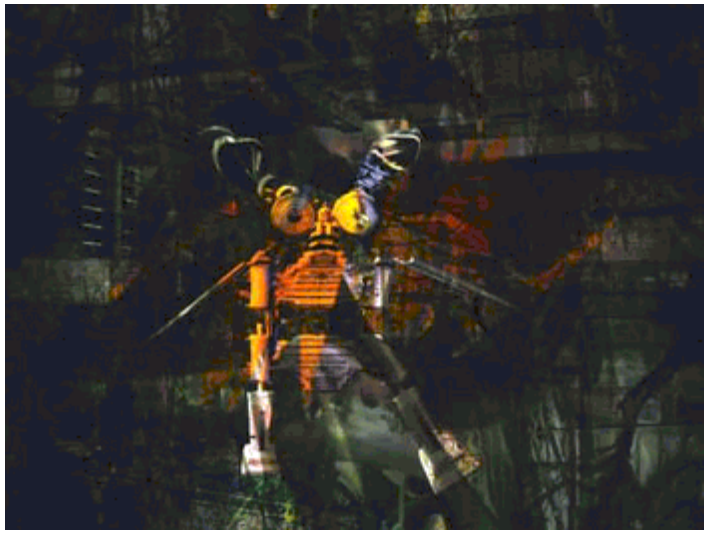
"You could survive riding the Gridley Wave?"

"I believe it was somewhat modified to make such a thing possible."

"And now you're here, the sun doesn't not bother you?"

Lupo eyed Slide coldly, less than pleased at what he obviously considered an interrogation. "Not when it is so very distant. I can feel it as an irritation, but it does me no harm."

Lupo's response was structured in such a way that it gave discreet warning that further questions on Slide's part might be considered an invasion of Nosferatu privacy. He had forgotten how sensitive old school vampires could be about unwarranted intrusions into what they viewed as their personal business. To gain information was to gain strength, but Slide knew he should, for the moment, curb his curiosity. Lupo could too easily take offense. Slide had seen vampires become offended and it was always violent and most times messy. He wasn't afraid of Lupo, but he knew, in a trial of strength, they were, at the very least, evenly matched and the outcome might be anyone's guess. Fortunately an outside distraction created a natural pause in the conversation. A trio of unsuspecting Fygglhgis came down one of the radiating paths on the far side of the stone circle. Their carapaces and tripod legs clicked as they moved, causing both Slide and Lupo to turn. At the sight of the demon and the vampire, the small crustaceans turned and beat a hasty retreat while exhibiting the body signs of three beings who have suddenly remembered urgent business elsewhere.



Slide nodded, as if totally understanding the nosferatu's confusion. "They are Fygglhgis. Indigenous Martians. I think our presence scared them off. They are understandably nervous creatures."

Now Lupo was even more puzzled. "Indigenous Martians? How can such a thing be?" He gestured around at the immediate environs of Albert Park. "I though all this was all an artificial fabrication on a dead world."

Slide didn't need to read the vampire's mind to know that Lupo didn't grasp, or hadn't been told about, the cathedral gulf of time across which he had traveled. He believed that the Gridley Wave had only transported him from Earth to Mars, and that he was on some dead and dry C21 planet. Slide didn't feel like being the one to tell him that he was also a cool eight million years in his own relative past, and that the Gridley Wave might not turn out to be a reliable return ticket. In fact, Slide decided it was high time to take his leave. "Well listen, Nosferatu Lupo, this chance encounter has been very enlightening, but right now…"

Lupo interrupted him.

"You think to leave?"

"I fear I have things to do and people to see."

Lupo sternly shook his head. "I'm afraid, Idimmu Slide, that the places to which you go and the people you will see have already been precisely determined."

Slide tensed, but did not move. "What?"

"This is nothing personal, you understand?"

"A matter of business?"

"Exactly."

"Then this meeting is not a matter of chance?"

"I fear not. I was sent to bring you to the Turquoise Tower."

"Turquoise Tower?"

"The palace of Queen Mina."

"You are in the employ of Sir Richard Barton?"

Now Lupo really was offended. "Indeed I am not, sir. The human is a crude and predictable pervert. If I am in the employ of anyone, as you put it, I am in the employ of the Queen herself."

Slide considered simply using the moment of Lupo's anger to take off. He had no idea if he could outdistance a vampire with his demon speed, but he was willing to give it a try. The problem with flight was that he had no clear idea to where he might flee unless it was back into the stews, knocking shops, and gin houses of the proles. He was hardly in any position to return to Rosa's or leave the city. He owed no debt of allegiance to these Victorians, but, from what he had heard so far, he doubted that the Slimy Things would greet him warmly should he try to defect. He might just as well go with Lupo to the Turquoise Tower. If nothing else, it would be a new phase in his Martian education. He was also amused by Lupo's condemnation of Barton as a "crude and predictable pervert" considering the vampire's feeding requirements, and methods of luring its prey, unless the Gridley Wave had radically transformed Lupo's metabolism. Slide raised an acquiescent hand. "I didn't think you were working for Barton. I just felt I needed to check."

"Then you'll accompany me of your own free will?" Lupo seemed a little disappointed that Slide was offering no resistance.

Slide gestured to the path that led away from the henge. "Shall we go?"

The demon and the vampire walked rapidly with Lupo's personal fog at their heels, and they occasioned looks of concealed mystification from passing humans who did not know what they were, but grew nervous all the same. A gate came into sight, and beside it, clearly waiting for them, stood a ornamented and very gothic carriage, drawn by four jet black thoats, with two Red Martian postilions in royal livery, plus two footmen armed with short barreled radium rifles, who looked both formal and dangerously practical at the same time.

"So my arrest is being conducted with a certain style?"

Lupo opened the door of the carriage, and motioned Slide to get in. "Who said you were being arrested?"

"It rather seemed like it."

"You are merely being conducted to an audience with the Queen."

"Is that what this is?" As he climbed into the coach, Slide could only conjecture that someone on Mars knew more about his situation than he did, and he didn't like that one bit. Again, it seemed that coasting with his curiosity might be the only way to learn who and

what. They moved off, and the postilions pressed the thoats to a sharp pace. Beyond the carriage window, a broad avenue carried only a light, nighttime traffic of carriages, steam cabs, and various models of electrocars. If he looked up, he could see the riding lights of Martian ornithopters, and, every so often, a man or woman would float by them in midair, supported by an Equilibrimotor flying belt. Slide did not have a good view of the Turquoise Tower until they had left the thoroughfare, and were ascending a wide spiral ramp that was the only approach to the palace of Queen Mina. The soaring structure that loomed beyond the window was a narrow but baroque tower, a blue-green phallus, spiky with buttresses and gargoyles, floodlit against the Martian night. It terminated in a hypodermic spire, some kind of transmission mast, or perhaps a mooring staff for airships.

As the carriage negotiated the rising curves of the ramp, Slide was also treated to a panoramic view of the Grand Canal and the desert beyond. Slide could hardly guess what Lupo made of the Grand Canal with its huge undulating pipes, believing as he did that he was on sere, and long dead planet. In the distance, Slide could see what looked like a second city, but where Extrosylvania was a place of light, neat within its circular walls, this

other conurbation sprawled dark and dirty, with tall smokestacks that belched black and noxious fumes into the thin Martian air, smoking slag heaps that blemished the red desert, and grim portals that revealed the angry red hearts of industrial furnaces. "What the hell is that place?"

On this point, Lupo knew more than Slide did. "Those are the Morlock Foundries

"The what?"

"Where do you think these people get their weapons, and the rest of their neo-Victorian toys?"

Slide had not been aware that Extrosylvania had an abundance of

weapons, but, very shortly, he began to see this was in fact the case. Queen Mina kept herself heavily guarded, to a point where he would have believed Extrosylvania

to be in a state of war, except that he had seen no similar signs at Rosa Coote's, or in the sectors of the proles. In those places, all had seemed peacetime normal, although he knew there was no predicting the paranoia of those in power. The coach passed through three sets of circular gates, defended by emplacements of heavy Gatling guns and light artillery, and manned by formidably armed guard companies of both humans and Red Martians. At the first gate, Slide also noticed blue flashes of concentric psychic energy briefly enveloping the coach, indicating to him how the Turquoise Tower was protected against threats both normal and metaphysical. They finally pulled up in a courtyard, where more soldiers waited, who, once Slide and Lupo had alighted from the carriage, immediately conducted them into the palace itself. With a six-*Martian escort,they were* swiftly through majestic, radium-lit corridors with walls, floors, and ceilings faced with geometric slabs of turquoise so large that they could have only been artificially produced. The destination to which Slide and Lupo were being led turned out the be a pair of tall and dauntingly imposing stainless steel doors, inlaid with gold and platinum, and flanked by even more armed men in the full armor of one of Extrosylvania's crack regiments.

The immaculate guards caused Slide to momentarily wonder if his clothing was completely suitable for an audience with a queen. Funny

how he always ended up in one variation or another of a dirty duster coat, and, if he hadn't known better, he might have believed himself the victim of a sartorial predestination. This final squad of guards relieved him of his radium revolver and gave him a small ceramic token in return, in order to retrieve the weapon later. Then the guarded doors swung back and Slide walked into the Throne Room of Queen Mina of Extrosylvania.

Story so far:*Accused of disrupting time and on the run from mysterious enemies, Yancey Slide, Idimmu Demon of the Tenth Continuum, finds himself leaving a trail of disintegrated backstory, as, somewhere else in the universe, unimaginable forces cause unthinkably destructive upheavals. Slide arrives on ancient Mars via Doc Zen's Carter Machine, only to discover that a coterie of extraordinarily perverse neo-Victorians have established a faux-British Raj on the Red Planet. After watching an intimate display of Victorian decadence at the Establishment of Mrs. Rosa Coote, he encounters the vampire Lupo and is, with no choice in the matter, conducted to the palace of Queen Mina, the ruler of the Imperial City of Extrosylvania.*

Episode Seven
The Turquoise Tower

The Throne Room was like a chill and austere boudoir of muted purple, small, gauze-draped gatherings of white gold light, and soft-focus shadows, but, beneath the cool control and austere restraint of the supposed philosopher-queen, Slide sensed a ruthless, and potentially explosive barbarism that would, sooner or later, demand to run free, if only for short intervals and in small measures. And, indeed, what else should he expect from She of Fable who had melded minds with Count Dracula. The lingering spell-by-association of the bizarre combination of vampire, human tyrant, and old school demon king was both implacable and indestructible. Although driven from the material realms, and the undead body of the Tepes the Impaler, by Van Helsing and his gang of repressed and ravening, witch-hunting bigots, old Drac, the Infinite Count remained as potent as ever, circling in orbit in the ever-vague, over-there of the Ancients, but somehow managing, maybe fed by the mass energy of his Legion of Darklost, to maintain a disembodied icon-presence, black cape and manicured fangs, in the culture of the consumer dimensions. In one time-stream he even ruined the minds of children with a heavily merchandised, but also heavily drugged, brand of breakfast cereal.

Slide had noticed, however, as they entered the throne room, that Queen Mina was being unhooked from a intravenous feeding set-up with decoratively imperial hardware. From long experience, Slide recognized that the oily fluid being introduced into the royal veins as almost certainly a cocktail that contained a unhealthy amount of the old fashioned IV tincture form of tetradetoxin, know as oblividol. Where the fuck was she at if she needed to be doped up on tetradetoxin, plus fuck knew what else? By the time anyone reached the need for a tetradetoxin drip, they had almost certainly picked up rare tastes for a lot of other highly addictive shit along the way. And what did that effectively say about Count Dracula, if his link with the woman could only be maintained by large doses of a powerful time and dimension stabilizer? Unless of course the tetradetoxin was to keep the Count at bay.

Queen Mina leaned forward as Slide approached the throne. She seemed to be having a little trouble focusing her eyes. "You are the demon?"

"I'm Slide, Yancey Slide, your Majesty."

She had the ever-young, ever-old, look of the vampire, but with an added lines of contempt around the mouth. Her courtiers probably called her slender, but to Slide, she looked as emaciated as a twentieth century cocaine concubine whose price was about to plummet, with skin like wafer thin, transparent ivory. "You have probably heard things about us."

Slide was assuming the queen was using the royal "us". "I have learned to not to pay very much attention to gossip."

"About how we are the Victim Queen of a Great and Legendary Evil?"

"I am a Idimmu, your Majesty, we really

don't grasp the concept of evil."

She fixed him with a stare that was penetrating, but was also inclined to drift off-focus at certain moments. "You are something of a conundrum, Yancey Slide?"

"I'm sorry, your majesty. I don't mean to be. It is my aim to seek simplicity in all things."

The Queen swayed slightly and Slide took this yaw in her inspection and questioning as a chance quickly to examine his surroundings. He had visited a lot of courts in his time. As a demon, he was able to move with ease and speed from lowlife to high places, and had never been totally certain which one he really preferred. His real interest had always been in the extremes. It was the center that generally caused him trouble. As courts went, that of Queen Mina was sparse. A small gaggle of Green Martian handmaidens ministered to her

needs, along with an equal number of human attendants, all underdressed for the chill of the Martian night, in the style of the seraglio paintings so popular in the colonial 1800s. Mina herself was barely clothed in a loose jeweled robe that could have been designed by Gustav Klimt, and might have been considered more suitable for the bedroom than the throne room. The garment used abstract mosaics of small glowing gems that, coupled with the movements of the wearer, produced constantly shifting shimmer patterns, but Slide suspected that at least some of the crystals could only be radioactive, and, if the Queen was, to any degree still human, they were probably wreaking havoc with her cell structure. The robe was also heavy and tended to fall open whenever she leaned forward, affording Slide a clear view of the dark nipples of her small but firm breasts. He could only assume that this was a private audience, unless of course Queen Mina was the pace setter of the local decadence, or attempting to emulate Catherine the Great. The small compliment of courtiers certainly indicated that whatever matter had caused the Queen to summon Slide to her presence was hardly for public consumption.

Aside from the guards and servants, just six individuals waited on the monarch's pleasure, five humans and one Martian, and the arrival of Slide and Lupo raised the total to eight. After introductions had been made, Slide found that he was in the company of Bolivar Morlock, an obvious Captain of Industry, the stereotypical fat capitalist, red faced from over indulgence in whores and vintage port, and arrayed in frock coat and solid gold watch chain. Sir Hubert Guest

was the elderly commander of the Royal Martian Air Force, while the even more antiquated General Cairngorm, was the senior officer of Queen Mina's imperial staff. An admiral would have completed the set, except that, on Mars, with its scarcity of water and complete lack of seas, high or otherwise, a navy was clearly redundant; something that Slide knew must have been a blow to this faux-British collective consciousness. On the Red Planet, Britannia had no waves to rule.

The two men were formally attired in full dress uniforms, blue and scarlet respectively, and all but bowed down by decorations and gold braid, and, Slide would quickly learn that they shared a common and aggressive stupidity that it was near-miraculous that the Slimy Things had not wiped out Extrosylvania long ago. A conniving oaf called Captain Harry Flashman was the human commander of the Throne Room's Red Martian guards, while a mute young woman who was referred to only as Prudence the Kitten, and whose function Slide was never to learn or fully understand completed the human representation. The ranking native in the throne room was Jalja Hajd, the Red Jeddak of Amhor, and Master of Indigenous Regulars. Queen Mina, however, totally ignored these supposedly familiar courtiers and concentrated exclusively on Slide. "You are said to have the ability to exist and function in multiple places at multiple times?"

Slide shook his head. "That is not strictly true, Majesty. It might appear so, but only because of the relativity of time and the singular perpetuation of the observer."

"We are not sure we understand."

"And I'm not sure I could explain without expounding a brief history of time and the separation of parallel dimensions."

"We have neither the time nor inclination for a history of time."

"That's why I hesitate to attempt it."

"We have heard that they hunt you in other realms of the continuum." "That is true, your Majesty."

"It is said that you deliberately caused disastrous alterations in an entire swath of very important time lines."

"It is said, ma-am, but that does not make it true."

"Then you are a fugitive from retribution for a crime that you did not commit?"

"That is my story, your Majesty."

"And you're sticking to it?"

"I am, ma'am."

"You must have been relieved when brought we you to our realm."

Slide resisted giving himself away by raising a cynical eyebrow. Either someone was deceiving the Queen about the reason for Slide's presence on Mars, or some temporal discrepancy had come into play.

At his side, he heard Lupo let out a faint exhalation as though he knew that the Queen might be misinformed. As far as Slide was aware Dr. Zen's Carter Machine had hurled him across both space and time on the Gridley Wave, and he had been slammed naked into the hard sands of Mars with not even Mahdjfb the Fygglhgis to witness his actual arrival. No one in the Turquoise Tower, or anywhere else on the planet, could have had a hand in the event, although he knew, from his perception of the subjective present, that could easily not be what they firmly believed. Thus Slide's reply was thought-out and guarded. "I would certainly rather be here than in some of the other places I have recently found myself."

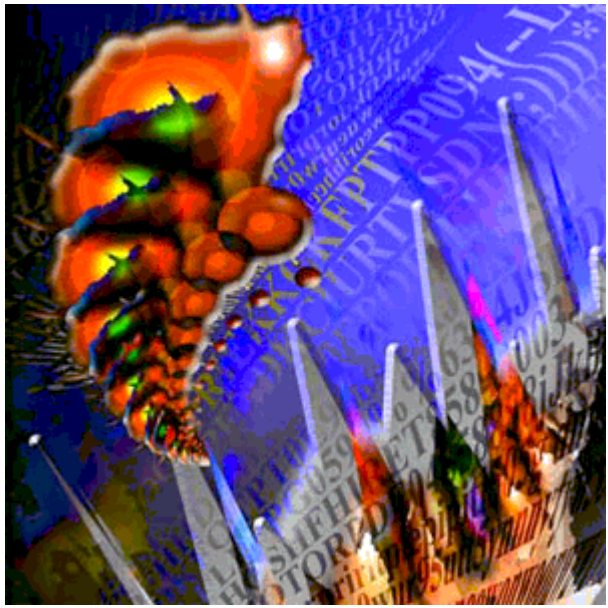
"But are you grateful to us, Yancey Slide?"

Slide half bowed and smiled. He might as well play along with the illusion for the moment. "Yes, you majesty. I am extremely grateful."

"Grateful enough to be of service in return?"

Yeah, well, he might have known. Nothing was for nothing, anywhere in space-time. Again he bowed. This time lower and with a greater flourish. "I am at your service, you Majesty."

Slide knew he was entering the art of the deal, but this was doing it the hard way, when the first phase was clearly going be waiting for Queen Mina and her coterie of courtiers to define exactly what the deal was all about. Like those who hunted him, and those from whom he ran, the Queen seemed to be under the delusion that Slide had the power to alter history and change the course of the future. It was nonsense, of course. Just part of the bad rap that had been laid on the idimmu almost since infinity. Sure, they could mightily fuck things up by the classic "Stepping On The Butterfly" time paradox, but any entity with



temporal jump capacity could emerge into a particular era, inadvertently destroy one crucial factor, and wreak havoc in another. Like the story went, he could step on butterfly in one time zone, and cause towers to fall millions of years later on the same timeline. The trouble was that survivors of the cataclysm would not remember that the towers had ever existed in the first place, because, in their reality, the towers never had.

The whole business of rearranging time was all an academic conundrum, with no practical application, no matter what his enemies might claim. He imagined that the Queen had some scheme in mind whereby he expected him casually to hop back a few eons, and eliminate the source of the Slimy Things, or whatever else might threaten the kingdom, but such an operation was never going to happen. Even if he had the power, the timelines in this neck of the nexus were almost certainly inalterably fucked up already. Only the Ancient Ones could know what havoc Mina and her Victorians had wreaked on the ecology of nearby time when they'd arbitrarily set down their imperial dog and pony show on antediluvian Mars.

The truth was that Slime didn't have half the power with which he was so often credited. Without the help of technology like the Gridley Wave and its more advanced cousins, he had no way of controlling, or even knowing, where his time jumps might take him. The myth that idimmu could navigate the streams of time, as opposed to merely jumping and hoping, was as specious as their supposed immortality. Sure they could handle immeasurably more wear and tear than humans, but, if he was sufficiently unlucky or careless enough to run into his own specific Instant of Termination, he could

find himself as non-existent and effectively dead as any deceased mortal. He wasn't about to tell the Queen any of that, though. While Mina and her crew went on thinking that he was the solution, and not just another itinerant problem, he at least had a hole in which to hide, here in out-of-the-way Extrosylvania. His only alternative was to jump out, cold and discorporate, back down into the Gantenbrink matter and the sub-atomic foam, and that was something he had no desire to do.

"We are glad to hear that, Yancey Slide, but I wonder how your enthusiasm will hold up when you learn the nature of the service we require of you."

Slide looked deliberately nonchalant and composed. "I find I can take most things in my stride. Why not tell me and see how I react?"

Queen Mina was about to respond when the capitalist Bolivar Morlock huffed and took a step forward. "Your Majesty, I must protest…"

"You protest too much and far to often, Bolivar."

"I'm sure Slide will prove a great asset in the long run, ma'am, but right now I feel we have to address the impending industrial strike. How can we hope to take the fight to the Slimy Things if the foundry is going to be closed down be idle malcontents, even for a matter of days?"

"As you well know, Bolivar, I am against sending in the army to intimidate your human workers and preserve your profits."

"It's the Green Martians this time, ma'am."

"You always claimed they were to stupid to demand a living wage."

"The Human Syndicalists have feeding them Marx, and they are taking to it like ducks to water."

General Cairngorm grunted and spoke for the first time in a voice so vague that it more than hinted at senility, opiates, or possibly both. "On Mars, there are no ducks and very little water."

Morlock snarled at Cairngorm. "You know what I mean, goddamn it." He turned back to the Queen and spoke with an awed urgency. "They have formed a union, ma'am."

The Queen lost patience and waved a dismissive hand. "Be silent Bolivar. Your labor troubles are going have to take a lower priority. Now Slide is here, we can perhaps strike at the very root of the problem rather than merely trimming each branch as it appears."

Before Morlock could respond, he was again interrupted. This time by the doors of the throne room being thrown open for the entrance of Miss Harriet Marwood and Sir Richard Barton. The couple were slightly breathless, as thought they had been rushing, with Marwood already making her apologies. "I humbly beg your Majesty's

pardon. We were detained."

"Detained?"

"Yes, ma'am. Richard had me birched.

The Queen turned her attention from both Slide and Morlock and starred quizzically Miss Marwood. "Birched?"

"A prolonged and thorough thrashing, ma'am. And in public, before the entire evening clientele at Mrs Rosa Coote's. Even though your summons was pressing, I needed a little time to recover."

Slide sensed a deep and probably degenerate relativity between the two women, but he could only guess at the explicits. The Queen arched a second eyebrow. "You allowed such intimately exposed infliction?"

Marwood gestured to Sir Richard. "I lost a bet with the brute, ma'am. It was a gambling debt, don't you know? What could I do but humble myself accordingly?"

"And now you're late and must humble yourself a second time, dear Harriet."

"Again, ma'am, I'm sorry."

"And was it a source of excitement?"

"The thrashing, ma'am?"

"The thrashing, Harriet. Later you will reveal your stripes to me, and promise to tell me all the lewd specifics, but for now you may generalize."

"Actually it hurt like hell, ma'am. My delicate cheeks still throb."

"You really can't complain, my dear, after all the thrashings

you've administered in your time. Don't forget. I have more than once been a witness." The Queen smiled as Barton and Flashman studiously avoided each others eyes, and the Red Jeddak permitted himself an expression of knowing satisfaction. "Did Miss Coote lay on the flogging herself? I understand she had a subtle technique."

Before Marwood could reply, Morlock huffed and began to protest. "You Majesty…"

"Shut up, Bolivar. How many times do I have to tell you?"

Suddenly the tower shuddered and a light dusting of plaster dropped from the ceiling of the throne room. Slide assumed a seismic occurrence. "Marsquake?"

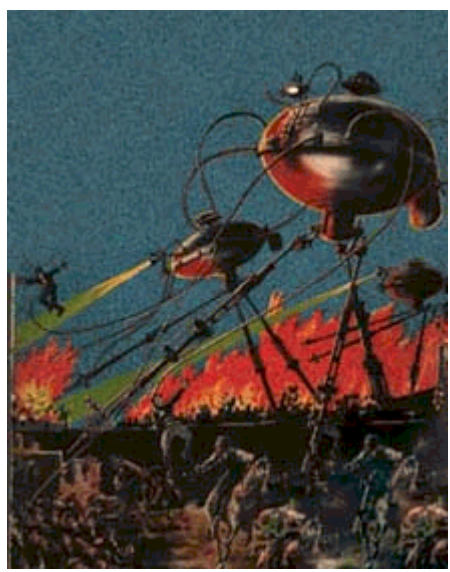
Lupo moved beside him and spoke in a

low voice. "The Slimy Things are firing their planet guns again."

"What?"

"They're firing their interplanetary cylinders. Probably at Venus."

"Damn." Slide wondered if might just be simpler to get the fuck out of there.



The Gantenbrink matter and the sub-atomic foam didn't seem so bad when compared to an enemy with guns that could throw an payload from one planet to another, but, for the moment, he decided he would stay with the situation and see what it might have to offer. The Turquoise tower shook a second time. Then a third. The Queen rose unsteadily to her feet and glared angrily at nothing in particular, and even, for a moment, dropped the royal "we". "I hate those damned things."

The courtiers exchanged concerned glances. Slide speculated, having seen the quantity of IV tetradetoxin she was taking, if the

Queen was prone to psychotic episodes, and if this might the start of one. "We hate them."

Somewhere over the horizon, another planet gun was fired. Queen Mina pulled the jeweled, Gustav Klimt robe tight around her shoulders. "We can't stay and listen to them."

The Queen staggered away from the throne, throwing the courtiers into confusion. Captain Flashman moved to assist her, but she waved him away. "Leave us. This audience is at an end. It is postponed. We cannot listen to their guns. Soon they will be coming for us."

Her guards massed around her, and swaying but determined, she turned towards an arched doorway to the right of the throne. "Slide will come with us. The rest of you will wait in attendance. We will resume this later."

None of courtiers said anything, but they exchanged worried looks. Sir Richard Barton appeared particularly exasperated by the sudden turn of events. Another explosive rumble shook the palace, and Slide stared round look for some hint as to what he was supposed to do. Flashman supplied more that a hint. "You better go with her, old boy. She doesn't like to be kept waiting, especially when she's threatening to have one of her turns."

As Slide moved to go after the Queen, he caught Lupo's eye. The vampire allowed the slightest questioning shrug that clearly said "Humans? What the fuck can you expect?"

Slide returned the silent comment with a nod, and then followed Queen Mina and her guards through the arch, and down what turned out to be a long and dark corridor.

Story so far: *Yancey Slide, Idimmu Demon of the Tenth Continuum leaves fractal butterfly trails of fragmenting backstory as he flees what may or may not be inter-dimensional justice. Arriving on ancient Mars via Doc Zen's Carter Machine, he finds himself in the perverse company of neo-Imperial Victorians who have established a faux-British Raj on the Red Planet. At the palace of Queen Mina, the ruler of Extrosylvania, he is granted an intimate, if hallucinatory, one-on-one audience with the Queen.*

Episode Eight
Transylvanian Mind Meld

An attenuated wisp of heavy, silver-white vapor, dusted with a slight shiver of hoar frost like crystalized stars, flowed from between the Queen's pale and slightly lips, over her chin, out across her throat, and down to her breasts. She sighed contentedly and small hesitant ripples disturbed the vapor. Then, moments later, something occurred that was extremely strange, even in Slide's mightily extensive experience. Her body appeared to dissolve, progressively consumed by the bright breath, ivory skin and emaciated flesh passively succumbing to the flow until she was no more that a tenuous mist herself, only approximately holding a temporary, moment to moment, human form. Slide could only speculate that Queen Mina was taking considerably more than just tetradetoxin if she could shimmer in and out of physical reality with such consummate ease, but while he still entertained that thought, the monarch's metamorphing took a turn for the even more strange. A new body started to form, made from what primarily resembled flawed organic Lucite, transparent but sinuous, with internal ripples of tension clearly visible, undulating with a languid chemical hedonism, that not only seduced a response from Slide's physical body, but even coaxed a certain wistful frisson from the inner entity. The body of the Queen had lain normal but motionless when Slide had first been ushered into the inner sanctum, formal as a prone corpse on a white ovoid at the focal point of one of the most elaborate beds Slide had ever seen. The ovoid was covered with the luxurious albino pelt of the rare horned apt that roamed the planet's northern polar cap, and contained between the slightly out-turned wings of a huge sculpted and transparent swan, the real dysfunctional magnificent. Like a stabilized ice sculpture, the rearing neck and head arched well above Slide's not inconsiderable stature, and, as the Queen had commenced her vapor-change, she and the bed had started to look as if they were both composed of the same material, although, in the case of the swan, the internal structure was frozen and still, while the Queen's was in constant motion.

Slide observed all from a dark shadow-throne, beyond the bed's immediate internal light. The handmaiden's final instruction, before showing him in from where he had waiting in the anteroom on the Queen's pleasure, had been. "You will seat yourself in the low-throne, and do not speak until Her Majesty speaks to you."

"Check." Slide was well aware that monarchies were held together by nets of fine-mesh protocol. "How will I know if I've got the right

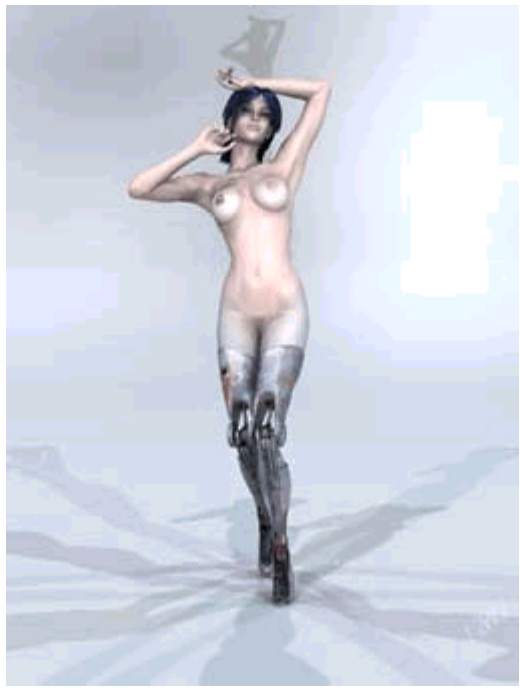
throne?"

"It's the only one. It is exactly positioned for you to gaze adoringly on Her Majesty."

Slide nodded. "No problem."

"Above all, don't look directly at her until you are seated."

"Whatever she wants."



He sat in a shadow-throne, all but invisible, but he drank cognac straight from the bottle, like a cheap-saloon cowboy, and took alternate pulls on a Martian lotus pipe. The bottle and pipe that had been waiting for him were the only sign that Slide's presence was anticipated. The inner chamber was lacquered black, and Japanese scarlet, with a deep gloss, mirror finish, and rigid geometry, sabotaged by claustrophobic falls of purple chiffon like enfolding fabric shadows. Slide sensed a bunker mentality, or maybe a vault 'n' coffin hangover from the time that the Queen had melded with Vlad Dracula, in that Victorian peak of the famous Count's four-hundred-year Transylvanian period. The Queen's body had commenced to move shortly after Slide had seated himself and taken his first drink. Slowly but with an inherent incitement, one long slim leg eased against the other, and her pelvis rotating slightly in the process. Slide was happy to remain passive and watch the slowly escalating royal auto-voluptuousness, until he was suddenly and dazzlingly distracted. Illuminated characters of light appeared in thin air, hotly pink in the red and the black dark of the chamber.

SD21
SD21
SD21
SD21
It pulsed like a silent alarm.
SD21
SD21
SD21
Flicker, flicker, flicker, flash.
SD21
Pow!
SD21
SD21

Slide wondered if it really was an alarm, and if he was expected to do something, but, right as he contemplated moving, he found himself restrained. The throne was, as far as Slide could tell, some dark Martian hardwood, carved into a relief of milling, intertwining dragons, but this did not stop the tails of the two largest dragons suddenly becoming alive and prehensile. He didn't resist as they coiled around his wrists, effectively binding then to the two arms of the throne. In part he didn't resist because he wanted to see what would happen next, but also because he was holding the bottle of cognac in one hand, and the pipe in the other, and really didn't know what to do with either of them. This problem was swiftly solved by the appearance of the handmaiden who had instructed him in the first place. Slide had not known she was even in the room until she appeared out of the shadows, took the objects from him, and withdrew, back into the concealing gloom. With the impediments removed, two more dragons' tails looped about his chest, and more secured his ankles. He was now quite helpless, and he wondered if it might have been a better idea to resist, although he doubted it would have made any difference. Now he was unable to move, the SD21 stopped flashing.

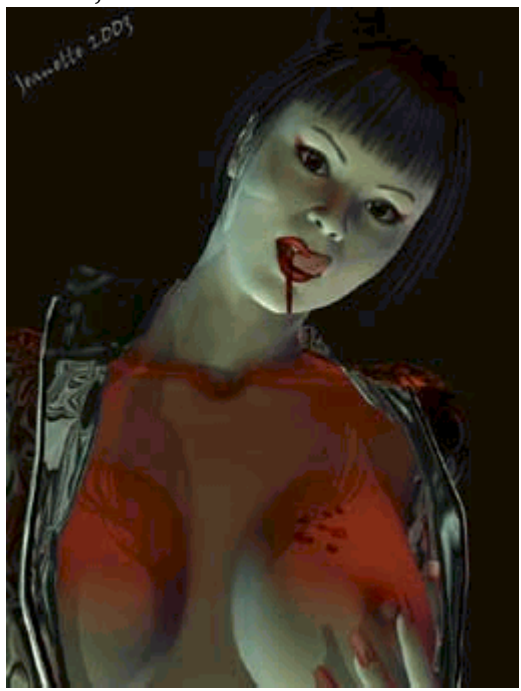
"You demons…"

The Queen spoke, and Slide decided it was incumbent on him to reply. "We demons?"

Now the Queen actually rose, and descended from the Swan bed. Her body was fluid in its transparency, and she moved with an unsteady but still-comely grace, that belied her transformation. She looked sadly at Slide. The change had in no way idealized her. Her body was still painfully thin, and her face still narrow and tending to judgmental, although the lips remained candid and suggestible. Finally she shook her head.

"You demons…"

"Can't live with us, but can't live without us?"



Her face hardened. "There are times when I believe all of that you are nothing but grown out gel-spots left behind from the First Squirt of the liquid para-mater." Slide noticed that she had dropped the royal "we" in her transparent form. "It's hard to believe you are made from the stuff of the Ancient Ones."

Had he been able, Slide would have spread his hands. "Perhaps imperfectly."

The Queen seemed envious. "You are effectively immortal."

"That remains to be totally put to the test."

She ignored him. "But you have no idea what to do with it."

"And you resent that?"

"You wear out one human body after another in the quest for suitable oblivion." The Queen stood in front of Slide with an expression of wistful amusement. "I arranged for you to be helpless."

"So I observe."

She raised her right hand so it was not quite touching his chest. Beads of vapor drifted from her fingertips and attached themselves to his coat. "I thought safer to have you restrained."

Slide was noncommital. "A neat device this throne."

With a move that was as sudden as it was unexpectedly violent, Queen Mina jerked open the front of Slide's shirt. A hand that was chill but plastic explored his chest. The body desired her, but the entity was curious and more than a little watchful. The two separating parts of him conspired to sigh. "You'll find me a little different to your

Count. We are both demons, but of a highly different ilk."

The Queen's eyes hardened, but a slight smile played at the corners of her mouth. "My Count, as you call him, is maintained, but halted at a safe distance."

Chill knuckles were on his nipple, squeezing and twisting, but now Slide did the ignoring, despite the copious surge of desire that jolted through the ex-body of Johnny Yuma. "And what of you, lady?"

Nails of ice raked down his chest. "And what of me Yancey Slide? You need have no concern about me. I am integrated. I have purpose."

Slide kept his face impassive, although the body would have liked to have strained yearningly against its bonds. "Where is it written that all should have purpose?" "You would rather run the dimensions in random flight?"

"We're both here on prehistoric Mars aren't we? Flight or purpose, we have arrived in the same place."

She removed her hands from him, took a step back, and frowned, "You're not one of those who believe that we are all chessmen in some game of the Ancients, are you, Slide?"

Slide shrugged, to the extent that he could while so restrained. "We play our own games with the lesser mortals, don't we? We amuse ourselves, right? Why should we suppose that the Big Boys don't do the same?"

She sighed and touched him again. Her face was close to his, and her breath felt glacial. She placed her hands on his shoulders. "Predestined chessmen or not, I have need of you, Slide."

Where her hands touched, his clothes froze, cracked and fell away. The body was beside itself in unpleasant ecstacy, as the clothing dropped in glass-like shards to the floor, but the entity that was the real Slide knew he was only being worked by chimeric distraction. The dragons' tails tightened their grip on his wrists, chest, and ankles. The Queen plainly wanted him helpless: for amusement, or did the requirement come from a deeper place? "I think I need a drink before we go any further."

Queen Mina pressed her cold plastic flesh against his, climbing the throne to straddle him. "You're afraid of me?"

Slide shook his head. It was the only part of him that he could still move. "No, but I would like to proceed with a combination of alcohol and caution."

Without removing herself from the chilly but intimate contact, the Queen raised a transparent arm and gestured to the handmaiden in the shadows. The Martian moved quickly to beside Slide, and placed the bottle to his lips. The delivery method was hardly ideal, but it would have to do. Slide again felt Mina's frigid breath as she asked him. "You also want the pipe?

"No. I don't feel any need to dwell in the dream canyons just now."

"Your body would like it."

"But the rest of me wouldn't."

"Why do you resist me?"

"Because you say you need me, but you don't tell me for what. Like I said, alcohol and caution."

Mina was now writhing against Slide, and his body was responding eagerly, straining against the bonds with breath coming in short, sharp, anguished gasps and heart racing. Now Slide knew for sure she was trying to unbalance him. "I need you. Isn't that enough?"

Fortunately Slide the Idimmu was infinitely schizophrenic, and could detach completely from the body, and its simplistic human lust. "All you have to do, your Majesty, is to explain."

The Queen's frozen breathing was also quickening. "I need your demon power."

"You'll have to be a little more precise."

"I need your demon power to change all this."

Slide's bound and heaving body, and the translucent form of the so sensually-busy Queen Mina were starting to merge at a number of points on their extremities. Where the foreplay had been distracting, this new intensity of melding was threatened to engulf the totality that was Slide, despite all his attempts at Idimmu detachment. He could have all too easily toggled down his logic and awareness, and wallowed along with the body-that-had-once-been-Yuma all those millions of years in the future, but Slide knew that to do that would be a serious error. He made an even greater effort to fully divorce himself the tactile storm and rise, discorporate, to a point in the middle of the air close to where SD21 had been flashing. He immediately found

himself facing the equally disembodied essence of the Queen, ready for the move and positioned to head him off.

"Your core-being is immune to my wiles?"

"My body is having a wonderful time. It doesn't need me."

Slide tried to peer past her to see if any other beings might be nearby in this private discorporation, but she deftly blocked him. "If you're looking for the Count, he's a long way from here."

"But you don't want me to see for myself."

"I am quite alone."

"I only have your word on that."

The Queen was icy in either condition. "I am supposed to rule here. I have to maintain some authority."

"But you claim to need me."

The two metaphysically copulating bodies were now completely merged, losing their physical integrity in a firework display of tantric energy, while the core-beings faced each other coolly. "You think it's easy for me to admit I need anything?"

Slide moved to the heart of the matter. "But you say you want to change all this?"

The Mina entity sighed. "I have come to the reluctant, but all too obvious conclusion, that coming to Mars was a good idea at the time, but, in the long run, a very bad mistake."

"For a replicated slice of the British Empire on Ancient Mars, it seems pretty damned coherent."

The Queen took on a negative and depressed coloration. "This place is nothing but a fragment of fantasy, and the people here are just a pack dentists seeking to make an extraction."

"Are you sure that's not just the tetradetoxin talking?"

"What do you know about tetradetoxin?"

"Plenty. In fact, a fuck of a lot. We Idimmu pretty much live on tetradetoxin."

"Then that's something we have in common."

Slide's body was moaning loudly while that of the Queen's was emitting prolonged cat howls. On the swan-bed the long, silky-white fur of the apt-pelt was standing on end as though reanimated by the so-total coupling. Slide made a discorporate gesture towards the torridly writhing energy mass. "Will I have a body left when we all that unnatural passion has run it's course?"

"You like that one so much?"

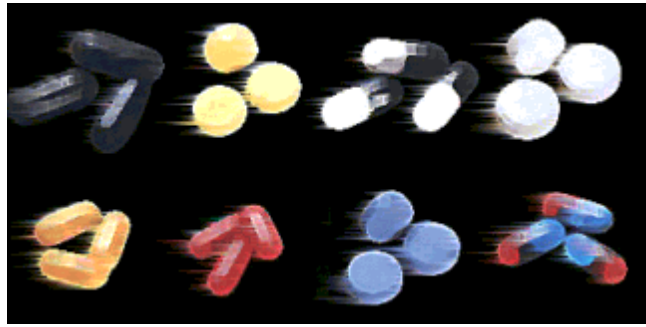
"No."

"So take another. I know you can."

Slide was sly and teasingly sideways. "I might take yours."

The Queen briefly sparkled with laughter. "It would seem that you already have."

"I'm serious. This is neither the time nor place to be breaking in a new one."



"Don't worry, we have drug that will restore us to whatever levels of normality we enjoyed previously."

Slide's interest was instantly piqued. "A drug?"

"It called fluxamelotide, and…"

"Fluxamelotide?".

"Flux for short."

"What does it do?"

"Among other uses, it's the prefect normality reconditioner."

"What's it made from?"

"You might not want to know."

"Believe me, girl. I have ingested some pretty out-there intoxicants in my time."

Queen Mina's entity took on a devilish hue. "Fluxamelotide is a distillation of the slime of the Slimy Things."

"Shit."

"Shocked?"

Slide metaphorically shook his head. "No, but you have to admit it's kind of extreme."

The Queen's color suddenly became business-like. "So are you going to help me?"

"You seriously want me to make this place like it never existed?"

The merged and flaming bodies had moved to the bed. Now it was Queen's turn to coquettishly reference their shuddering multiple orgasms. "It's surely the least you could do after the good time I've been showing your human receptacle."

"It may not be as easy as you think."

"But you'll try? Tell me you'll try."

Slide could see that the Queen was close to pleading. She wanted an answer, and he suspected that it would not go well for him it he didn't give her the one she hoped to hear. He went for one final delay. "Why go to all the trouble? This place can't last. Sooner or later it'll fall, either to the Martians or the Slimy Things."

"I don't want to wait that long."

"It might not take that long. Look how fast the American Empire fell apart on most C21 timelines."

A purple impatience suffused the Queen. "Even if it happened tomorrow, I am in no condition right now to deal with the crippling sense of defeat that would naturally follow."

Slide knew he had no choice but to go along with Queen. He would agree to what she wanted, and continue to play out the game one moment at a time. "I'll do what you want. You have my word."

The Queen flared happily. It was the first time that Slide had seen her so positive and satisfied. "Be assured, Yancey Slide, you will not find me ungrateful."

Then, at that very moment, the entire discorporation fell apart.

As far as Slide could tell, the forcible transition that suddenly engulfed them had nothing to do with the Queen's gratitude, but was the product of a wholly external intervention. After a nanosecond of infinite falling, he and Queen Mina were rudely dumped down in the physical, and, as if that wasn't enough, they discovered that Lupo, with a frightened handmaiden behind him, was standing beside the swan-bed watching them, as they untangled from each other's intertwined limbs, and torsos slick with shared fluids. As soon as he was able The Queen sat bolt upright, nude and furious.

"WHO FLUXED US UP?"

Lupo, the Renaissance vampire bowed gravely. "It was me, your Majesty. I had to do it."

"You?"

Lupo's face was like a carved Michelangelo. He was plainly well versed in the unpredictability of royals. "Me, ma'am."

"You're nothing but a visiting vampire."

"That's why the task fell to me. The others were scared of what you might do to them."

"They were right."

"Sir Richard suggested I should bring you the bad news, ma'am."

"And you weren't scared?"

"I am nosferatu. What could you do to me? I don't even fear the sun on this planet."

"And what news could have been so horribly important to warrant this intrusion?"

"Your city would seem to be in clear, present, and highly immediate danger."

"Danger? The city is always in danger according to Barton."

"An uprising has broken out among the Martian workers at Morlock's foundry."

The Queen's anger mounted. "A STRIKE? You interrupted me for a bloody INDUSTRIAL ACTION?"

"It's more than a strike, your Majesty. It is an armed insurrection. The Red Martian workers are well organized, and marching down the railway that connects the foundry and the city."

"I'll hang Bolivar Morlock. This is all his fault."

But Lupo hadn't finished. "Meanwhile…"

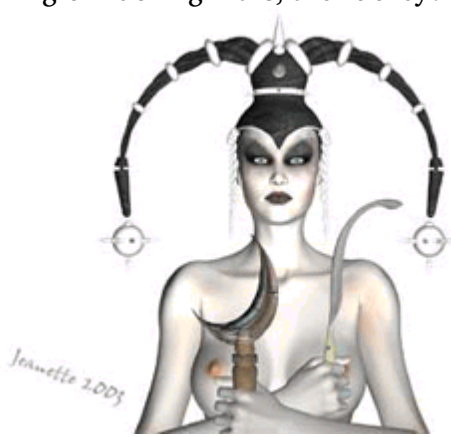
"There's a meanwhile?"

"There's a meanwhile, your Majesty. The Slimy Things seem to have taken the uprising as some kind of signal, or at least an opportunity. Their fighting machines are advancing rapidly on the Grand Canal with what would seem to be hostile and aggressive intent."

The Queen turned to Slide. "Now do you see why I want you to do what I want you to do?" Before he could respond, she was snarling at the handmaiden. "Don't just stand there you wretched girl. Hurry, damn it. Summon the rest. I have to dress. I have to select a uniform. Didn't you hear the vampire? The city is under attack."

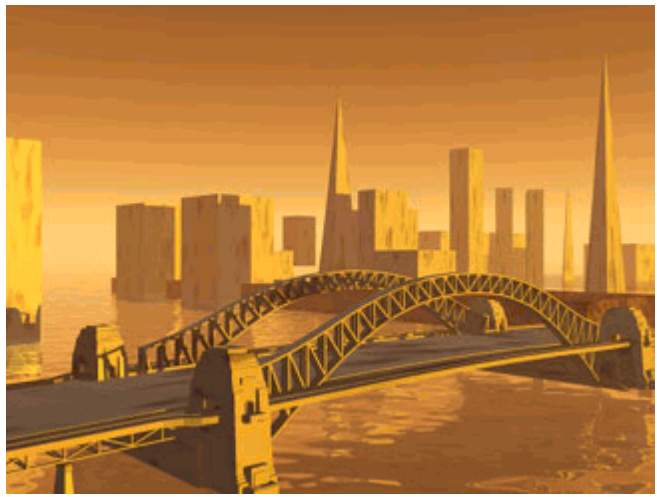
Slide and Lupo found themselves ignored by the irate flurry that was the Queen and her attendants, and Lupo spoke in a low voice. "If you find a way out of this place, I would considered it a favor if you took me with you. These humans are more insane than most."

Slide grinned at the venerable Vampire. "What did you expect, pal? They're living on fucking Mars, aren't they?"



Story so far: *Yancey Slide, Idimmu Demon of the Tenth Continuum, running from a fragmenting backstory, finds himself in a Martian revolution. The workers are rising up angry against Queen Mina and the neo-Imperial Victorians who have established a faux-British Raj on the Red Planet.*

Episode Nine
Workers Of Mars Unite!



Across the span of the bridge, mob chaos confronted mounted geometry. As Slide watched from his vantage point on a high balcony of the Turquoise Tower, several thousand workers from the Morlock Foundry, a mixture of humans and red and green Martians, united and marching under black banners emblazoned with the emblem of a crudely stylized clenched fist, swarmed across the final bridge that led into the city of Extrosylvania. At the nearer end of the bridge, a double, line-abreast formation of Red Martian cavalry waited for them. The huge war-thoats

snorted and pawed at the ground, but the plumed and turbaned riders seemed calm and impassive, as though they believed that the throng would, at the last moment, turn and retreat in the face of such an impressive show of force. This was the first time that Slide had seen Queen Mina's troops deployed for a confrontation. He had only previously observed them in ceremonial mode, parading for the colonial Victorians.

The workers were clearly in the motivating grip of a powerful and long suppressed anger, but all combat logic dictated that the strikers from Bolivar Morlock's hellish steel and munitions mills - even though some carried wrenches and spanners as makeshift weapons - stood no chance of breaking through the armed lines and into the city. The show of force arrayed for their benefit was simply too overwhelming, and their only real options were to turn back or be cut down in their tracks. Behind the cavalry, a second formation of Martian civil police,

in black and tan uniforms, stood with equal menace, some leaning on the leashes of snarling calots, the tusked and ten-legged Martian equivalent of attack dogs. Behind them a solid, defensive square of red-coated infantry, armed with repeating radium rifles, provided a final, and apparently unassailable bulwark against working class heroics.

Slide knew, however, that uprisings didn't always play out the way they should on paper. He had seen the similar confrontations on the St. Petersburg timeline in 1917, and in New Damascus in 2209, when the Dionysian Bolsheviks had risen against the Tharg, and everyone knew the unexpected outcome in those conflicts.

Lupo the Vampire, who stood beside Slide on the balcony, must have read his mind. "That's always the question, isn't it? Will they open fire on their own kind, or will they mutiny in the final moment of truth?".

Slide didn't like his mind being read by a nosferatu just because the nosferatu could do it. He grunted with irritation. "The moment is pretty fucking close."

"Who was it who said that war is a bayonet with a worker on each end?"

"Damned if I remember, but you can be sure it wasn't one of them." He gestured to where Bolivar Morlock, Sir Richard Barton, Harriot Marwood, Prudence the Kitten, the elderly generals, plus a growing crowd of courtiers, both military and civilian, human and Martian, surrounded the Queen in this moment of emergency, babbling what could only be conflicting advice. Slide and Lupo had both decided that they wanted no part of this and stood off on their own.

Even the babbling ceased, though, as the distance separating the mob and the cavalry was progressively reduced until it was less than a hundred yards, and the mob showed no signs of turning back. A hundred yards became eighty yards, then eighty became sixty. A thoat reared, as though anticipating what was surely going to come, and a calot started barking hysterically and could not be quieted by its handler. The front ranks of the workers seemed to falter for a moment, but then they surged forward again, either having regained their courage, or simply pushed forward by those behind who weren't so precisely aware of the threat that faced them on the bridge. At the fifty yard mark, the cavalry drew their sabers and cruel curved blades flashed under the orange Martian sky. A roar went up from the mob and the leaders began to run forwards, as though impatient to meet either death or glory. An order was shouted, and the mounted troops also plunged ahead. The helmeted riders struck left and right with their swords, but did not achieve the instant rout that might have

been expected. The strikers might have been sparsely armed, but, on the confining span of the bridge, their numbers were enough create a problem. Workers by the dozen reeled away with blood pouring from horrible wounds, and others were killed where they stood, but no matter how many times the sabers rose and fell, more pressed forward. Thoats were hemmed in by the press of the crowd, and hands reached for the riders, dragging them down in a mass of hobnail boots, iron tools, and pounding fists.

Urgent whistles blew, and now the civil police moved into the fray. The calots furiously attacked with bared fangs, and policemen with drawn sidearms opened fire. As the first reports of radium weapons were heard on the palace balcony, Lupo glanced at Slide. "Now the shooting starts."

Slide nodded grimly. "It sure does."

He wished he knew the name of the bridge. Whatever the outcome of the head-on confrontation, it would preserved in Extrosylvanian history for as long as Extrosylvania had a history. More workers were felled by the gunfire, but they were also arming themselves. Snarling calots were hacked to pieces. Policemen were effectively mobbed and their pistols taken from them. An eddy of mayhem could not be contained by the balustrade of the bridge. Steel and stone gave way, and two thoats and a dozen of more men and Martians plunged, arms and legs like windmills, to flagstones of the underpass roadway a hundred and some feet below.

"This is getting messy."

"Very messy."

Slide could see the eventual outcome all too easily. The cavalry and the police had failed to put the workers to flight, and were, in fact, barely holding their own. It could only be a matter of moments before the infantry square was brought into play, and orders were given for the redcoats to clear the bridge with withering volleys. As Slide figured it, the only thing holding back such a slaughter was the indecision of the officers at the scene, and the many police and cavalry in the line of fire. He suspected, however, that a reluctance to butcher their own would not remain a delay or consideration for very long.

Those on the bridge seemed to come to the same conclusion as Slide. In the center of the span, a lull had ensued in the hand to hand fighting. The pistols still barked, but both sides were falling back, regrouping as best they could, and using whatever cover the dead and the debris afforded. Orders were being shouted and the infantry were assuming formal firing positions, but then the loud voice of a Martian woman cut through the general din.

"Warriors of Mars! Warriors of Mars! Listen to me!

The pistol shots dwindled and heads turned.

"Warriors of Mars! Listen to me! When did you become the slayers of the defenseless?"

Consternation broke out around the Queen. General Cairngorm was demanding to know why the infantry had not commenced firing, but, down on the bridge, an eerie silence had fallen.

"Warriors of Mars! We are the workers! We are just like you. We labor in the foundries and the mills just as you serve in the ranks. Will you shoot us out of hand? Are we not tied by blood? The very blood that you are about to spill?"

An injured and bleeding cavalryman got painfully to his feet, started limping back towards where the infantry stood ready. The woman's voice gained strength. "Warriors of Mars, when did you murder your own people at the command of humans? When did you slay your own for no good reason? Are you no better than the calot that kills at the word of its master? Have you forgotten that your ancestors and our ancestors were the Great Jeddaks?"

An infantry sergeant-major attempted to drown out the woman by yelling at his troops in heavily accented Martian-English. Already the native redcoats were starting to look confused.

"Kill the loudmouth bitch, lads! Kill them all!"

No one fired. Lupo again glanced at Slide. "A moment of truth, I think?"

"Any second now."

But the infantry failed to open fire, and the woman made a final plea. "Warriors of Mars, don't do this thing!"

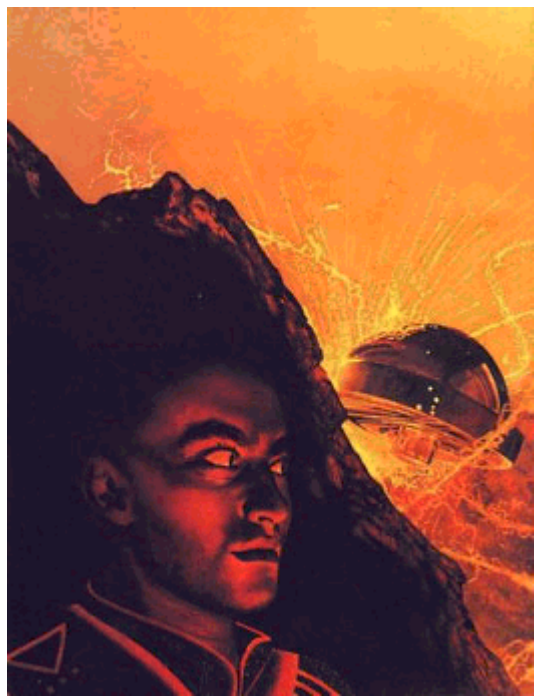
As far as Slide could see from a distance, the sergeant major flew into a sudden rage. He turned and shot the woman. This was too much for three of his men in the front rank, who immediately aimed their radium rifles at him. Slide could only credit the sergeant major with having more courage than common sense. He rounded on the men and screamed at them. "You bastards all know the penalty for mutiny!"

Lupo sighed. "Now?"

But, instead of being resolved, the conflict for the loyalty of the native troops was interrupted by a series of explosions that came from behind Slide and Lupo, from the other side of the city. The two turned and looked. Lupo sadly shook his head. "I fear the Martian revolution has come too late."

Four of the tall, tripod fighting machines of the Slimy Things were attacking the walls of the city with the scarlet wash of heat rays and the poisonous green pulse of particle beams. Maybe a dozen or more were striding over the Grand Canal, smashing the complex pipework in the process, causing jets of water to fountain high into

the Martian morning. Air support came with the fighting machines in the form of streamlined metal ovoids flashing with electrical charges that, when they had risen to a sufficient intensity, arced jaggedly to the ground to cause fires and more explosions each time they struck. Once a section of the city wall was burned and bombarded to rubble and ash, the breach was filled with battalion formations of metalmen, the human-simulacra ground troops of the Slimy Things, who were far too wet and vulnerable to do any of their own fighting. With more courage than common sense, a crisp detachment of Martian cavalry attempted to confront a fighting machine, and was burned to a crisp in an X-ray moment for its bravado.



That was sufficient for Lupo. "I don't know about you, Slide, but I have seen enough cities fall in my time. I could miss the rest of this drama."

Slide glanced up. "I tend to agree with you."

High in the sky huge flying discs were converging to form a geometric hovering pattern.

"It looks as though the Slimy Things have acquired telezero technology from the Treens. Unless of course the Treens acquired it from them. It can get hard to figure who's doing what for whom, when time's up its own ass. "

As Slide had feared, a bolt of heliotrope energy flashed up from somewhere beyond the horizon and struck the discs. They in turn translated the dazzling light into a single, narrow-beam projection,

directed down at the city. Where the beam touched, all was dematerialized, and it slashed the metropolis leaving scars of nothing over a hundred yards wide.

"Let's go while there's still some of this place left to leave." Slide avoided Lupo's eyes. "I hate to tell you this. Seeing as you're a vampire, and can't be too happy about all this exotic light radiation…"

"Tell me what, Slide."

"Getting out of here may not be exactly what you'd call simple without a howdy hole, which I don't think even existed this long ago."

Lupo looked old and dangerous. "So what are you telling saying, demon? That we're stuck here?"

"Unless we find ourselves a Carter machine or some good facsimile thereof."

Lupo blinked. "Well that's no problem."

Slide was surprised. It hadn't occurred to him that the Victorians had their own Carter machines, although it did make some sense. "It isn't?"

"There's the big one that brought me here. It's in a cental vault, deep under the tower, close to the stasis generator."

Slide blinked. "A Carter machine and a stasis generator in the same place? That's a wigged-out concept."

"Shall we go there instead of standing around discussing it?"

Slide nodded, and while Mina and her courtiers stood transfixed, watching the destruction of the city in horror, the demon and the vampire headed back inside the tower. Just as they were about to pass through the arch that led to the interior, Slide turned and gestured to the bridge on which the interrupted Martian revolution had been about to start. "You don't happen to know the name of that do you?"

"The Beckham Bridge."

Slide shrugged. He didn't understand the reference.

Lupo led Slide quickly along corridors and down flights of curved, Turquoise Tower steps, with what appeared to be an unerring sense of direction. Slide could only wonder how the nosferatu, who claimed to have been on Mars only slightly longer than Slide, could know his way around the labyrinthine layout of the place. He certainly proved that he did when they quickly arrived at the brass and steel gates of a multi-shaft, high-speed pneumatic elevator. Lupo dialed for an down-designated car, and one arrived in a matter of second. This was in no way too soon for Slide, who could feel the very structure of the tower trembling from what could only be the Slimy Things' assault on the city. They stepped into the car, and, no sooner had the lift gates hissed and clanged closed, it dropped like a stone, obviously descending to the deep bowels beneath Queen Mina's tower. As the elevator's free fall mitigated, and the two regained the floor under their feet, Lupo

handed Slide the radium revolver that he had taken from him during the carriage ride to the tower. "You may find a need for this."

"Do you have a weapon?"

Lupo glanced at Slide with a noticeable disdain. "I am nosferatu, Yancey Slide. Among humans, I have no need of weapons."

The elevator's stop was abrupt enough to cause Slide to bend at the knees, although Lupo didn't waver. The gates of the car slid back to reveal that had descended to a vault of energy. The air smelled of ozone, positrons, and charged dark matter, and a high pitched hum rose and fell but never dropped out of the dogs-only audio range. Lupo hadn't exaggerated when he'd said that the place was deep under the tower. Slide felt as though they could not be that far from the Martian planetary core, and at least a part of the cavernous interior was only a faux-reality, kept in place by a stasis generator. Slide didn't like to be anywhere near a stasis generator. He's seen too may of them in his time with Billy Oblivion, and he didn't like the way their center never held.

Lupo again seemed to be reading Slide's reactions. "Let's just concentrate on the Carter machine, shall we?"

Slide put aside his dislike of stasis generators, and turned and looked the thing up and down. "That is one big motherfucker."

And indeed it was. No simple chair, lever, and revolving power canopy like the one he'd ridden from Doc Zen's place what now seemed like an age ago. A towering Faraday cage, awaited them, topped by multiple spinning blades; a huge brass and steel construction that was a undeniable peak in the massive Victorian super-technology of time machines. For a moment, Slide stood and stared with undisguised admiration. Who had put Queen Mina up to all of this? She was so tenuously connected with even her own reality, he found it hard to believe she had devised all this on her own, and the set-up was way past the capabilities of Sir Richard Barton or any of the other self-important courtiers. Dracula? He doubted it. The cavern had nothing of the Tepes stamp to it. When Slide had last seen the Count, he hadn't even liked steam trains. Of course, there was no accounting for radical change in this cosmos, but he still wondered who the hell had Her Majesty been hanging with?

"Shall we use the damn thing, or just stand and admire it."

Slide blinked back to the challenge at hand, and waved Lupo ahead of him. "So go aboard, my friend. After you."

Lupo treated Slide to a dour look. "You had better go first, demon. I have no idea how to operate this thing."

"That might be a problem."

Lupo looked concerned. "You can't run the machine either?"

"I can probably figure it out, but the first question is where's the

dope?"

Lupo frowned. "The dope? What are you talking about?"

"The dope. The tetradetoxin, the zombie juice. We can't ride the Gridley Wave without it."

"I took no potions when I came here."

Slide suddenly felt trapped. "Yeah, well, that may be your nosferatu metabolism, but I have to be seriously medicated before I can be hurled willy-nilly across space and time. You know what I mean? I don't want to get to where we're going and not have, for instance, a body. I've had enough of those games. I'm through pulling rotting rabbits out of threadbare top hats."

"You have to have this tetradetoxin?"

"Damn fucking right I do."

Lupo seemed to be considering the problem, but before he could proffer an answer, a loud pneumatic hiss, and a sudden gust of very cold air, announced the arrival of a second elevator car. It gates clanged open. Slide and Lupo turned and found themselves facing the Queen, escorted by Sir Richard Barton, Harriot Marwood, Captain Flashman, and three human guards in hussar's uniforms.

Barton immediately barked officiously at them. "Slide, Lupo, step away from the that machine, dammit. The Queen has to be removed from the war zone."

Slide knew he spoke for Lupo. "Fuck the Queen."

Lupo chuckled deep from his Italian roots. "I think you already did."

Barton and Marwood had weapons in their hands, and the hussars were raising their radium rifles, but Slide didn't even have to react. Just like it was 1880, and he was still hanging with the Curly Bill Brocius and the Cowboys. He laid fire from the radium revolver until the power pellet was exhausted, and, by that time, only he, Lupo, and the Queen were left standing. Queen Mina looked down dispassionately down at the dead, and then up at Slide. "Don't you think you perhaps over-reacted?"

Slide shrugged. "I never did like your crew."

The Queen nodded. "So do we get into the machine and leave this place? Or do we wait for the Slimy Things to come to either fry or digest us?"

Slide glanced at Lupo. He didn't have to speak. Should they take her, or was Mina Harker just an unwarranted complication? Lupo spread his hands. "She is a friend of the Count. And she might have the drugs you need."

Slide locked eyes with Mina. "Do you have the dope?"

"It's in the machine."

"I don't believe you."

"Trust me."

Slide turned and stepped inside the Faraday cage of the big Carter machine. "I don't know why I'm doing this."

Lupo and Mina followed. "Take a red pill from the dispenser."

Something akin to a brass and glass, double cylindrical gumball machine was bolted to one of the uprights of the cage. One tube contained red pills, the other green pills.

"A red pill?"

"That's right."

Slide clicked a green pill into a brass cup

at the base of the two tubes. He picked it up, looked at it, and then swallowed it. A blinding impact pain hit the rear of the base of his skull and reality

turned black.

Story so far: *Yancey Slide, Idimmu Demon of the Tenth Continuum, attempting to escape the collapse of the neo-Victorian colony on Mars is slammed into unconsciousness by the green pill from the dispenser in the Carter Machine beneath the palace of Queen Mina.*

Episode Ten
Lost In Space

White, white, white, white

Slide found himself being clothed in what seemed to be an ornate and very elegant suit of space armor, black byzantine plasteel, with the traditional clear Lucite bubble helmet, and the smoothest tuck and roll jointing. As more of the suit assembled from nothing, Slide could see that it was complexly engraved, with the Green-jade Basilisk of the Knights of Galifrey, to which, of course, Slide was actually entitled, emblazoned on the chest plate. A heavy, custom-crafted blaster hung from a strap-down clamshell, low on his right hip. The weapon was so serious, Slide would have considered it to verge on cumbersome had he not been all too well aware of its businesslike overkill. The 75-gig modified Raymond was top-shelf firepower, and clearly fabricated by some very particular, master weapon-smith, probably in the Rhebzad mountain caves of arctic Mongo, if the brass-knuckle, crow-foot grip was any indication. The blaster was off-set on his left side by a Capulet vibrafoil that swung from a breakaway Venezian sling, and tapped against the armor of his left leg as he moved. The outfit was fine by Slide. Slick, stylish, and it kept out the void, and he liked the fact that he was also heavily and elegantly armed, but, after so many immortal eons, he was under no illusion that its materialization was, in any way random. Either the work of an unconscious extension of his own greater demon-self, or an interested outside party, with too much power and definitely too much inside perception?

"But, either way, why am I all done up as if I was expecting the Pirates of The Lower Quadrant? And if I am, where the fuck are they?"

Neither space pirates nor any other thing else was visible anywhere in the proximity of Slide's immediate present. He free-floated in what appeared to be intergalactic space, which was about as dislocated as a body could get. Fear parabolics were cutting through his armor and, all round him, possibly sentient particles searched for partners in the dance of annihilation. Why all the palaver with the hardware if the Gridley wave had dumped him here in the middle of nothing? And where were Lupo and Queen Mina who had supposedly left Mars at the same time he had? Slide had no real idea how exactly a Gridley wave functioned, but he didn't believe that it would simply reassemble him in the back of the black stuff. Surely the double-damned piece of junk required some kind of destination in order to function. Even a free form time/dimension jump had to have a start and end. The starts and ends might be totally repugnant and unsuitable, but at least they came with a bit of workable reality attached. He had to believe that some substantial tangibility was somewhere nearby.

"But why the fuck can't I see it?"

And then, no sooner had he uttered the fate testing, synchronous words, he saw it. Huge and intricate and, at the same time, possessing

a vast and fragile delicacy. "Goddamn it, to hell. When is destiny going to cut me a break?"

An Eloi bio-craft had floated oh-so silently into his perception. By Slide's reckoning, the petals of the sail stretched nine hundred Earth miles, and yet were insubstantial as gossamer, spread and trimmed, with constant adjustment, by a system endless and impossibly complicated rigging, to trap the starlight and be carried by its momentum, until after a hundred years of acceleration, the vessel all but matched the speed of light itself, slowing only enough to maintain conclusive mass and three relative spacial dimensions.

"From ancient Mars to the full flowers of evil. My fucking karma must have rotted and died." He looked around. "And what the fuck happened to Lupo and the Queen? Why aren't they here to deal with the goddamned Eloi?"

Slide didn't for a moment entertain any doubt that the Eloi bio-craft was his ultimate destination, or bother to wonder why he had come to it by such a roundabout route. He was not in the least surprised when a long and continually extending tendril, like a transparent, ghost-leaf tentacle, detached itself from a part of the complex main-mass closest to him, and started moving tentatively in his direction. Someone or something aboard the ship had sensed his presence in empty space and was bringing him in. He could only assume that Lupo the vampire and Queen Mina Harker were still riding to Gridley Wave to who knew where, or had dropped off it even before he had.

"I guess that's the last I'll see of them."

As the tendril came toward him, he unsnapped the Raymond's holster, but didn't draw the weapon. He had heard all the stories about bio-craft that consumed all other organic life as fuel, but, since Slide tried to avoid outer space, he had never seen such one of the fabled things for himself, and ignorance was a very good reason to be the one to initiate an overtly hostile act. It paid to be circumspect around the wholly alien, and although the Eloi were approximately human, the strange sentient ships that carried them were far from it.

The tendril was close, halted some three meters from him. Small sub-fibers

grew from the end, and made the final approach. Slide's left hand eased stealthily to the Capulet vibrafoil. If anything went wrong, he could at least attempt to slash himself free. The tendril either saw the move or sensed his intention, and hesitated. He raised his hand from the blade. The fibers came on. They touched the chest plate of his space armor, and instant feelings of well-being and euphoria swept over him. He knew he was being deliberately fed the goodvibes, but he gave the tendril the benefit of the doubt, and assumed the calming influence was well intentioned.

As with the fibers acting as an anchoring attachment, the tendril looped around him. When Slide was firmly in its grip, it began to retract, drawing him towards the body of the bio-craft. Too late to fight now. As the old-time Borg were so fond of putting it, resistance was futile.

In a matter of seconds, he was out of the void and in among a filmy, leaf-like outer-growth that covered the entire exterior of the ship, and, Slide assumed, was an organic means of trapping radiant energy from space. He was suddenly in a place of dappled light and limited visibility as he was pulled deeper into the canopy. He also noted the leaf things moved out of his way, as though informed as to the tendril's intention.

t only released him once he was inside what he though of as the orifice, a mouth-like slit in what he assumed was the hull of the craft, with fleshy, vegetable labia. When the orifice closed behind him, Slide was momentarily in darkness again, and this time he made no pretense at reaching for the blaster when the disembodied voice came out of some soft and sightless nowhere.

"Remove your helmet, Yancey Slide."

"Forget about it."

"You will find the air quite breathable."

"I'd rather confirm that for myself."

"As you wish."

Some inner portion of the orifice opened, and Slide found himself in a high cathedral place of grey mists, and blue and green light. A sudden return to gravity caused him to stumble slightly as he found himself on a floor that was covered in a thick carpet of lush moss. He walked carefully ahead until he reached what looked to be a path that wound between the moss-banks, and revealed that the moss flourished on a floor of yellow brickwork. He halted and looked around. Distances were hard to judge, but the lack of an horizon, and the way the floor curved up, until it was lost in some high distance, led him to believe that he was on the inner surface of some vast and hollow spheroid.

"Follow the yellow brick road? I don't think so."

The disembodied voice was back. "You could do worse, Yancey Slide."

"Would you care to explain?"

"The swiftest way to the Orchids."

"What?"

"The yellow brick road is the swiftest way to the Orchids."

"The Orchids?"

"The Orchids are."

Slide suspected that whatever intelligence controlled the voice was not much smarter than a talking clock. A simpleminded verbal transfer.

"The Orchids are all round us."

"Where?"

"The Orchids are all round us."

Slide looked up. What he'd though of a jungle style tree canopy was in fact a complexity of huge petals that rose, dipped, and shivered, inflated and deflated with what Slide read as a languid vegetable ecstacy. Insects and humming birds danced constant attention and, at regular, perhaps even timed intervals, puffs of heavy vapor gasped into the upper air and then drifted down as a localized drizzle.

"Remove your helmet, Yancey Slide." The voice sounded as though it had come back to where it had started. "You will find the air quite breathable."

Slide hesitated. He knew to remove the helmet made sense. The air in this part of the bio-craft looked maybe high in carbon dioxide, but by no means harmful, and if he continued to be stubborn he would only deplete his own reserves.

"I won't argue."

His hands went to the ring fastening, and as he was twisting the

helmet lock he heard another voice. "You can take off the helmet, but I'd keep the suit on." "What?"

The new voice came from a distance, but was certainly not disembodied. Something was moving in the mist beyond the moss. At first Slide couldn't distinguish it as anything but a hunched form. Only when the thing was a matter of fifteen or twenty yards away did it cease to be a thing, and was revealed as a man in the most complicated mechanical wheelchair that Slide, as far as he could remember, had ever seen.

"I said you can take off the helmet, but keep the suit on. That's if you don't want to end up like me."

Slide unlocked the helmet and lifted it over his head. He took an experimental breath and found that the atmosphere in this part of the bio-craft was heavy with humidity and stank of cloying perfume and chronic plant decay, but was, at the same time, perfectly breathable. "And who are you?"

"I am Sternwood."

To say that the figure in the wheelchair was a man might have been considered by some as an exaggeration. In fact, this creature who called himself Sternwood was barely half a man. His right arm, right leg, most of the right side of his body, and the lower right side of his face had seemingly been dissolved away, as though by a powerful acid. Slide could see that this Sternwood was human, but how he could have survived such a devastating chemical attack was a total mystery. The motorized chair with its feeder tubes, gleaming chrome, and hardwired circuitry clearly kept him alive, to the point that he and the chair were practically integrated as one.

"I am Slide."

"I already know that."

"Then you have the advantage of me."

The half face attempted a grotesque smile. "I would hardly say that."

Slide looked the creature in the chair up and down. "You might be right."

"At least you're honest. Many try not to look at me."

Slide placed the helmet under his arm. "Maybe I value honesty over delicacy."

"You're doubtless wondering what happened to me?"

"Obviously."

"It was the Orchids."

Slide looked up at the canopy of fleshy petals. "The Orchids?"

"I was half digested before I could convince the Orchids that I'd be of use to them, and they spat me out again."

"I'm not sure I completely understand."

"Never been on an Eloi ship before?"

Slide shook his head. "No, not me."

"You want a drink?"

Slide shrugged. "Why not, now I'm here."

Sternwood slapped a control on the chair with his remaining hand. "I can't drink myself, but I like to watch a man who can."

"I'm not a man. I'm Idimmu."

"I know that, but you'll pass."

Three figures emerged from the mist. Two girls and a boy, if that was the right term for the ever-young species. All three wore lipstick, sultry eyeshadow, alien jewelry of plant-like inter twining gold curves, and filmy capes of sheer gauze that left them functionally naked. Slide's body took notice of the near-nudity, as they responded to Sternwood in near-chorus

"Master Sternwood?"

"Master Sternwood?"

"Master Sternwood?"

"Give Master Slide a drink, my children."

Slide frowned. "These are your children?"

Sternwood approximately shook his head. "No, but I treat them as such. You can really do what you like with them."

The male Eloi stepped forward and whipped a silk wrap from what turned out to be a chilled bottle of Dom Perignon '52. "Does this please new Master Slide?"

How the hell a bottle of Dom Perignon '52 came to be aboard an Eloi biocraft presented something of a puzzle, but Slide was in no mood to ponder details when there was so much else to consider. "Sure, and totally unexpected."

The Eloi male popped the cork, with an accustomed skill that, in itself posed another how-the-hell question, and handed Slide the bottle along with a long spun silver drinking straw. Slide declined the straw. Apparently the Eloi didn't know everything about serving vintage champagne. He look a swig straight from the bottle, and, only then, realized that he had been extremely thirsty ever since he had materialized in deep space.

The three Eloi spoke in chorus again.

"Any one, two, or all of us would be most happy to engage in sexual congress with you, new Master Slide."

"Any one, two, or all of us would be most happy to engage in sexual congress with you, new Master Slide."

"Any one, two, or all of us would be most happy to engage in sexual congress with you, new Master Slide."

The body became extremely enthusiastic at the prospect, but Slide brought its hormones to heel, and glanced at Sternwood. "But that

would involve removing my armor?"

Again the half-face smile. "The Orchids have taken quite a few that way."

"I'm not sure I get this. These Orchids feed on humans and Eloi?"

"They feed on anything mammalian that moves."

"How does that work?"

A set of servos lifted Sternwood's head so he was looking up. A sudden flurry of movement had started up in the canopy. "I think you're about to get a practical demonstration."

A huge fleshy petal, purple at the edges, but soft pink in the center, extended downwards, reaching to enfold one of the female Eloi. As it closed around her, she neither struggled, resisted, or cried out. Her companions looked but also registered no protest, or attempted to save her. Once totally enshrouded by the petal, the Eloi form could be seem for a few seconds and then it slowly shrunk away as though absorbed by the flower, or, as Sternwood had put it, disgested by it. After maybe a minute, the petal unfurled slightly and a few fragments of bone dropped from it to the carpet of moss, that swiftly moved to cover and conceal them. Slide looked sharply at the remaining Eloi. "You don't have a problem with that?"

The boy and girl shrugged. "It is the way if the Mulch. There can be no question."

Sternwood sniffed. "What can you do? It's how they fuel their ship. What you need to concentrate on is not getting caught."

Another, very familiar voice from behind him took Slide totally by surprise. "Having to wear these damned suits all the time gets really tired when you've been here as long as we have."

Slide spun round, reaching unconsciously for his blaster, and found himself facing Lupo, Queen Mina, and Mrs. Rosa Coote. All four were wearing space armor similar to Slide's. Lupo raised a hand. "Hold with the weapon, demon. We've been wondering when you would arrive."

Queen Mina nodded. "For some reason, you were left behind on the Gridley ride." "Does someone want to tell me what's going on?"

Rosa Coote was terse. "There's no time for explanations, except that it would appear we've all been brought here for a purpose."

Queen Mina lips pursed. "And you can imagine how I hate being brought anywhere with a purpose. Unless, of course it's my own."

"So what is this purpose?"

"It seems that this vessel, despite its size is about to come under attack by space pirates and we are expected to feature in its defense."

"What?"

Lupo, who was very plainly unhappy, came close to snarling. "You heard what she said."

"Space pirate?"

"That's what we've been told."

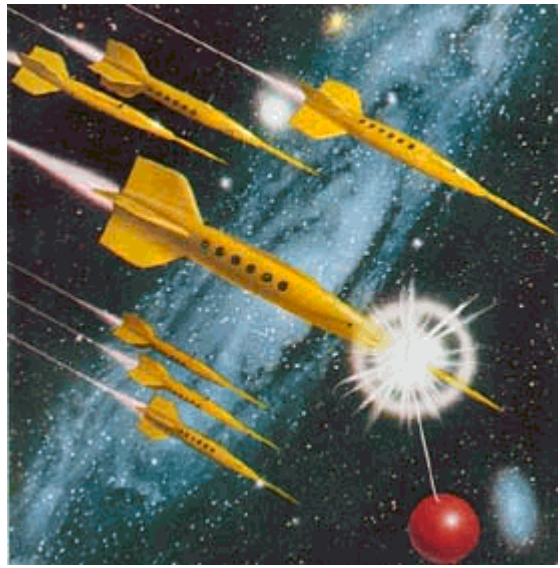
"Not the pirates of the Lower Quadrant?"

"How did you know?

"Just something that came to me I was still in the Gantenbrink."

Story so far: *Yancey Slide, Idimmu Demon of the Tenth Continuum, now lost in space in the company of Mina Harker, Rosa Coote, and Lupo*

the nosferatu, following his abrupt and less then orthodox exit from Mars, finds himself thinking of fat and fires as he arrives aboard an Eloi biocraft just in time for an attack by extra-planetary buccaneers



Episode Eleven
Pirates of the Lower Quadrant

The entire pirate fleet swung majestically into the field of the gaseous display; three distinct formations, and two dozen or more small ships. Slide knew from millennial experience that Pirates of The Lower Quadrant had never been able to maintain a single, overall coordination, but they had at least all managed to arrive in the same place at the same time. He could only imagine that recent pickings had been slim, and the Eloi biocraft was viewed as necessity rather than a prize. Although not exactly acting as one, the sheer size and variety of pirate fleet was epic; discs, deltas, and asymmetrics, Treen telezeros, Adamski saucers, ancient, tri-robot fighters left over from the Cylon wars, and Pleiadean beamships, attack-customized with strap-on Steely Dans. When the alarms had sounded, Slide had expected maybe a half dozen marauders, but what he saw was closer to two hundred ships, that ranged in size from hulking, rust-stained, former Imperial Sardakar battle-barges, to tiny predator pods of the metal-eaters that were more cell structures than machines. In the middle of the attackers, Slide spotted the dark bulk of the cruiser Starhawk, which was more than enough to crystalize his immediate flight or fight response, and it was wholly the latter.

"Out of here?"

He turned to Lupo, expecting to be met with a similar negative reaction to his own, a desire to get off and away from the Eloi ship by any means necessary, but Lupo was staring at the buccaneer armada with rapt attention. He was totally absorbed and, behind the plexiglass of his bubble helmet, his eyes blazed with a chill and momentary nosferatu glee. "So the ballet begins."

For a vampire created during the Italian Renaissance, Lupo seemed to accept a space battle with pleasurable anticipation. He was the closest that Slide had ever seen him to excited.

Slide, Lupo, Queen Mina, and Mrs. Rosa Coote, still in full space armor, helmets locked down, and with the semi-human Sternwood leading way on his rolling mechanized chair, hurried to what was known as the cortex. On any ship of steel, polymer, ceramic and electricity, the cortex would have been would have been called the bridge, but on an Eloi ship, where almost every component - from gunport to bulkhead - was more or less living cell-structure, things were done a little differently.

The centrepiece of the cortex was a misshapen ovoid, a thick, multi-vesseled,

dermal sheath containing a slopping liquid interior of sweating, and - Slide suspected - sentient ooze. The monstrous and less that appealing growth stood over thirty meters tall and maybe three times that in circumference, and it was surrounded by a complex, tree-like gantry, on the branches of which selected Eloi monkey-moved - serving/aiding, maybe controlling the huge soft-ovoid's function - although Slide doubted that the nebulous Eloi, too dumb even to prevent themselves being eaten by the orchids, were capable of any such thing, and that nothing controlled either the cortex or the biocraft, except the cortex or the biocraft itself. The primary function of the Eloi on the various gantry levels seemed to be that of entering or modifying data by massaging, kneading, and prodding designated sections of outer skin, much in the style of those old monks in the Damaged World who'd had a big bio-computer they'd called the Living Meditation, or the Vreen'agth who had called their all controlling bio-brain the Mind-Sac. Slide knew that he was in some crucial confluence of the biocraft's primary nervous system, and he didn't like it. Growths of giant orchids lined the walls of the chamber, but seemed to play no visible role in its operation, except, every now and again, one would reel and unreel a predatory tendril as though stretching.

"I feel like a parasite."

He had not addressed the remark to anyone in particular, and no one answered. This lack of response was mainly because the pirate fleet had chosen the very same moment to open fire, not with any degree of coordination, but, when one group decided to blaze away with everything it had, the rest obviously felt it was incumbent upon them to do the same. The first thing this barrage revealed was that the biocraft had sturdy and effective screens, extending well into the mid-distance, that manifested themselves with a purple, zapper flash each

time a photon torpedo, a plasma blast, nova boom, or the burn from a PBA, attempted to penetrate it.

Slide, Lupo, Queen Mina, and Rosa Coote were able to view the battle on a highly detailed repro-vision that appeared before and even around them, and provided a panoramic, if somewhat ghostly 180 degree view of the space immediately in front of the Eloi biocraft. The appearance of the display was the one acknowledgment of their arrival in the cortex. The biocraft didn't appear to have any captain, commander, first mate, or even a master at arms to greet them, brief them, or otherwise tell them what they were supposed to be doing there. This part really didn't bother anyone except Slide, and since no one else in the group from Mars seemed to share his instinct to flee - and he wasn't in the mood to discorporate out on his own - he contented himself, for the time being, with standing beside Lupo, and watching the miniaturization of the conflict unfold. The pirates were maintaining their intense bombardment, but the biocraft was so far successfully taking on the shields.

When the biocraft finally returned fire, seemingly a result of an almost orgiastic flurry of physical activity on the branch-like gantries around the mind-sac, he observed that the biocraft was by no-means vegetable helpless, and, in fact, could muster two separate levels of weapon technology. One was matter/anti-matter-based, as Slide might have expected. Slow-moving plasma fireballs were dispatched from some invisible transmitter behind his vantage point. The other was more remarkable if less spectacular. Where the fireballs - once locked on - rolled up on their targets and consumed them to a crisp, the other weapon was nothing more than a focused double-eex-zee shimmer in space, and the vessel at it's epicenter simply winked. Slide figured the weapon manipulated its target past the Horowitz barrier, and shifted it in either time, space, or both, and, if the mind-sac, or the supposedly, top-of-the-food-chain orchids were capable of viciousness, it probably re-materialized in the heart of a sun without its occupants having a chance to set the controls.

Just as Slide was starting to come to the conclusion that this Eloi ship was so fucked up no one would ever going to bother to tell him and his companions why they were there, but just leave them alone to observe the battle undisturbed, three Eloi detached themselves from a group of a dozen or more at the base of the mind-sac. In this state of emergency, they still favored their filmy, gauzy, semi-nudity - more suitable for a Dionysian bacchanal than a firefight - and, as two women and one man approached, they still seemed both vague and vacant, but at least managed to look a little worried. They first spoke to Sternwood in their own lisping, trilling, multi-octave castrato-sounding language. The half-human in the cyber-chair was seemingly

supposed to play interpreter, and Slide wondered why the ones who had served the champagne in the previous episode had spoken English and these didn't. Was it some obscure matter of protocol, or had the champagne servers been specially trained by Sternwood?

"The Eloi want to know what input you might have regarding the current crisis."

"Our input?"

"They credit you with more experience in these things than they have." Queen Mina's voice was royally contemptuous. "The Eloi, I suppose, need all the help they can get? Having failed to grasp the tactical basics to avoid being eaten by flowers."

Sternwood gestured acquiescently with a prosthetic. "You could say that." Mina was suspicious. "I'd have thought the ship itself would make most of the decisions. It must have been in situations like this before?"

"That would be true, except the ship tends to be reactive. The Eloi hope for some kind of more outgoing suggestions, since, it would appear, they fear the ship might decide to reduce itself an eterna-pod in the face of danger."

"Eterna-pod?"

"A huge space seed, able to grow again after a period of dormancy. If that were to happen, the Eloi - and us - for that matter, would perish very early in the process."

Slide, the Queen, Lupo, and Rosa all received this news thoughtfully, but no one felt inclined to be the first to rely. In the end, Lupo turned to the wheeled half-man and shrugged a slight, uniquely nosferatu shrug. "What can I tell them? I've seen wars and am intimately familiar with death, but I have little or no advice in this context."

Rosa Coote nodded. "None us are exactly military experts, except maybe Slide, although if the tales told are true, he's more of a specialist in diversion and desertion…and maybe street fighting."

Slide was about to defend himself, when Queen Mina interrupted. "Actually I have some grasp of battle tactics. I organized a number of military campaigns against the Slimy Things on Mars before I entered my narcotic phase."

The Eloi again chattered at Sternwood. They seemed impatient. "So what should they do?"

"They should get busy masturbating that great sack of goo to ensure it keeps with the present plan and doesn't turn into a seed on us. Or something equally damaging and ridiculous. All available power to the screens. They can't fight off the pirate fleet, there are far too many of them, so everything depends on how much of a battering the screens can take. If they go down, then we have only one thing in

our favor."

"What's that?"

"The enemy's intention is to plunder, not vaporize. The biocraft is a very valuable prize. The profit-taking on the tech alone would be planetary GNP. We might well find ourselves in more danger when the pirates fight over it among themselves. As they inevitably will."

Slide couldn't fault her reasoning. Mina Harker's mind had become far more acute since she had left the drug-soaked fleshpots of Mars. He was also calculating the odds, when the pirates stormed the Eloi ship, of being able quickly to change sides in the confusion since, in all their fancy battle armor, the four of them looked considerably more like pirates than Eloi. He, of course, said nothing in front of the Eloi. It might be necessary to grease a few of them for theatrical effect and authenticity when the moment of realignment came.

The Eloi chattered a third time at Sternwood. Impatience had turned to urgency. "They say that the shields will last…well…roughly translated into your time scale, about another twenty minutes."

Mina arched an eyebrow. "I can only suggest they stand by to repel borders."

Sternwood translated this for the Eloi. This seemed to be enough for them, and they hurried away, apparently issuing twittering instructions as they went, back to the center of the cortex. Slide glanced at Mina. "You think they have any chance of handling this?"

The former Queen of Mars shook her head. "None."

And her estimation of the Eloi Mina's was confirmed all too quickly and all too clearly, when they deployed their defending force, presumably, as Mina had told them, to repel boarders. The ones who came to make their stand in the cortex were in full fantasy, and there was no reason to believe that others in different parts of the ship were not the same. The first to appear were a squad of archers, moving in precise military formation, longbows a high port and light gossamer cloaks flowing. Lupo almost choked. "Archers?"

Rosa Coote more scornful than surprised. "They look like bloody elves."

The archers were followed by what Slide would describe later as a "phalanx of operatic fucking hoplites." By this point, Lupo had regained some of his composure, but still couldn't believe what he was seeing. "It has been a long time since I saw anything as fatuous as this."

Slide gestured as fatalistically he could in his heavy armor. "It happened all the time back on the Darogad. They came at each other from out of all manner of historical fantasies. You'd see mounted Mamalukes with lances and scimitars hurling themselves at Nazi-style panzers."

"And did the Mamalukes expect to win?"

"That's been a hotly debated point ever since that particular incident."

"No Mamalukes left to ask?"

"Exactly."

"Are the Eloi stupid enough to think they might win?"

Slide looked bleakly at the Eloi force. The best word was theatrical. The lightweight silver armor, the long slender lances of the infantry, their small circular shields, and the apparent fragility of their fused-glass swords suggested nothing less that a wholly negative and ass-backwards grasp of reality. When an archer was plucked at random by an orchid, apparently as a snack, his companions looked round wondering what to do, Slide could only, slowly and sadly, shake his head. "The bastards really are as dumb as an flower's lunch."

From that point on, there was really very little to do but wait until to see if the shields went down as the Eloi had predicted, and watch the apparently inevitable come to pass on the repro-vision display. Slide knew he should have acted on his original instinct to jump out of there. Now it was totally too late. No way was he going launch himself back to the Gantenbrink through all the flashing, throbbing mess of energy that surrounded the beleaguered biocraft.

A four-pod Treen fighter, that would have been more at home over the silicone flame belts of the planet Venus, suddenly double-eex-zee winked out and was gone. A second-generation Cylon craft, with the trademark, oscillating redeye, was consumed by a plasma fireball. A Steely Dan suddenly blew apart in spectacular explosion for no reason that was immediately apparent to Slide. The pirates were certainly taking a beating, but for each pirate that flared, burned, or merely vanished, a dozen more remained to take his place. The Eloi shields pulsed and shimmered under the constant onslaught of multiple weapons, and were taking on the violet-through-ultra sheen that indicated they were stretched to the limit. Spectacular as the battle might be, Slide kept at least one wary eye on the cruiser Starhawk that simply held its position and poured relentless phaser fire at the biocraft shieldwall. Although, right then, it carried no markings of planet or fealty, he knew that it had, in various timelines served as the grim flagship of Chacedon the Terrible, who's concubine had, more than once, been the equally malevolent Nuygen von Bulow. A part of his mind was kept occupied with an examination of the possibility that one, if not two, entities that really hated him were close at hand, an eventuality at high odds with his total disbelief in coincidence. Maybe it wasn't really the Eloi or even the orchids that had brought him to the biocraft. Could it be that he was really being set up for one, if not two, or his most sworn and vindictive enemies?

Needless to say, he didn't communicate any of this to his companions. They had more than enough on their minds right there and then, and he also was far from sure how they, especially Lupo, would react, if he revealed himself as a potential liability. The situation was plainly turning bad, and Rosa Coote's expression was grim. "It can't be too long now."

Mina concurred. "There does come a time when surrender is the best remaining option."

Lupo glanced at Sternwood. "You want to relay that piece of advice to these creatures?"

Sternwood wheeled his trolley around. "No. I doubt they know how to run up a white flag anyway."

Had the four not been sealed in their armor, they would have noticed the a distinct smell of burning vegetation, but they couldn't miss the wreath of green-tinged smoke that drifted.

"I would say that boded bad."

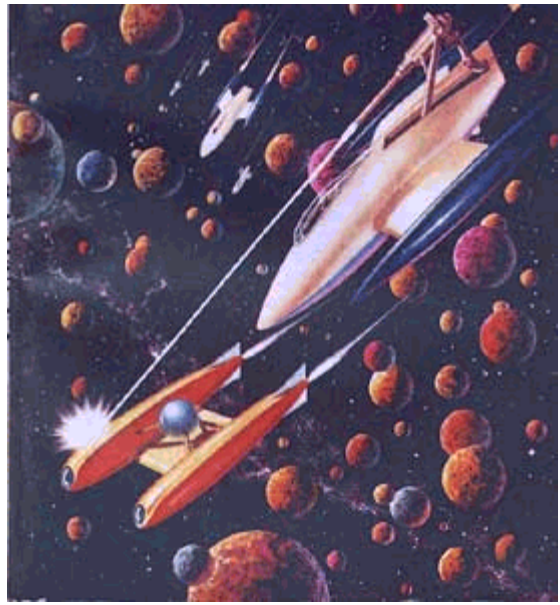
Slide scowled. "Really bad."

Sternwood revved his chair. "I'm out of here."

Lupo, for whom desertion was a capital offense, reached for his blaster, but Slide stayed his hand. "Let the poor bastard find himself a bolt-hole if he can. I mean, look at him."

Moments after Sternwood had sped away a rip appeared in the outer shield's integrity. The edges of this energy wound sun-flared with such intensity that it momentarily blanked over the repro-vision. The inner shields briefly burned with white fire and died. A Convair saucercraft came through the resulting gap, flowed by a beamship, and then whole slew of assorted pirate vehicles. Although their gunports were wide open and still hot from the bombardment, no fire was directed at the Eloi ship.

"As soon as they get a few of the bigger ships through they'll be looking to board us."



"Soon as the burn through whatever passes for a hull, they'll doubtless send in a scouting part of war ferrets."

Lupo watched the pirates close on the biocraft with a detached, nosferatu interest. "I imagine they'll kill everyone aboard."

Rosa Coote checked the defenders as though assessing numbers. "They will preserve enough, I suspect, to sodomize and otherwise have their piratical way with.

"Does that mean the next episode will be seamless and shameless cross species rape and pillage."

"I would expect so."

Mina Harker agreed. "Vertebrates and invertebrates, all going at it."

Story so far: *Yancey Slide, Idimmu Demon of the Tenth Continuum, in the company of Mina Harker, Rosa Coote, and Lupo the nosferatu, finds himself cursing his continuing run of monolithic bad luck as the Pirates of the Lower Quadrant board the Eloi biocraft bent of an surfeit of rape and pillage far in excess of any old fashioned "kill the men and carry off the women."*

Episode Twelve
In Space, You Scream

The clear plexiglass helmet of Slide's space armor was locked down tight, and mercifully muffled him from some the cacophony that howled all round; the shrieking glossolalia of sexual depredation that fragmented the smoke-filled and still burning cortex of the biocraft as the Pirates of the Lower Quadrant exacted their savagely traditional tribute. He stepped back hurriedly as a bouncing sag-sack morphed into something quite unrecognizable; complicated, dripping, and obscene. The ugliness leaped high and then fell with a pornographic squelch on a pair of young Eloi, male and a female, hurling them to a deck that was already awash in loathsomely multicolored fluids, and wrenching furiously at their delicate protesting flesh. The helmet also preserved Slide from the overwhelming stench of secretion, distention, debasement, disgorgement, and bodily abuse, all around him, as Slime Things slathered any entity that came within range of their drool, and priapic molluscs rammed rampant appendages into orifices never designed to accommodate such calcium-based erections. Bodies heaved, mandibles snackered, limbs and tentacles waved and intertwined to the point of lewd and grossly indecent surrealism, and, all the time, protesting voices howled in the face of polymorphous violation. To his immediate left, a crew of quasi-amazons of Nardaz with cabalistic tattoos displayed under Lucite body armor, and sporting heinous strap-ons, slapped and sodomized more stripped and screaming Eloi, irrespective of gender, bending them over control consuls, forcing them spreadeagled against bulkheads, or simply taking the submissive casualties of onslaught on all fours on the befouled deck, hard-riding them like dogs amid the muck. And even Slide had to raise an eyebrow when one huge, chromadryn-soaked hot-for-the-lethal centurion dispatched her lust-object with a deathblast, execution-style, at the lustmorde moment of rapid-fire multi-orgasm. The Saphs of Nardaz prided themselves on knowing how to party, but Slide suspected the homicidal showing off as an attempt to exceed the extremes of excess, and a trying their damnedest to look the Baddest of Bad among Very Bad Company. Even in the confusion, and with smoke-impaired vision, Slide could see that the Saphs had their corruption cut out for them if they were to claim the dubious title they seemingly so desired. StormKlown Nialapods, with exposed ganglia seething in slop-sacs, locked cloud minds with random victims, and ripped the raw and glowing orgone-skeins of conscious energy straight from the brain. Meanwhile, the

Corsairs of H'nad had secured a side ventricle of the cortex and were already setting up their ceremonial hempen devices, while Holy Rounders with electro-whips collected what they liked to call - while laughing nastily - their subjects for geometric stress experiments. The Treens simply killed. These were the crews from the x-quad Telezeros that Slide had watched performing in space, as the Pirates of the Lower Quadrant had swung into massed attack. As old-school Treens, they could do nothing else. All concepts of less drastic or more subtle sources of excitement had been bred out of them during the era of the Mekon. The zom that was with them had no such limitations. The indigenous and semi domesticated tusked tracker dog of Northern Venus had retained all of its physical instincts, plus a few additional and conditioned nasty cross-species conditioned habits. The Treens and their pet/mascot advanced down the one of cortex's radial access passages, fusing everything that moved with their raypistols, and soaking up the death-release energy shimmer in the horizontal flat-tubes of their purpose-modified gold band-wrap. Like the sag-sack, the Saphs, and the Corsairs, the majority of the invaders went after Eloi. The biocraft was, after all, the pirates' common-prize, and that made its inhabitants the designated victims. A few attackers, however, were not so discriminating. The Slime Things, the Nialapods, the suc-Grreeezz, and their ilk went after any creature, friend or foe that had an aperture that suited their purpose. The constant small arms fire also led Slide to suspect that, in the confusion, crew beefs and interspecies rivalries were also being settled, and when the butchers bill for the engagement was calculated, the reality would be that more pirates had been slaughtered by their own than by the pathetically inept Eloi defenders with their delicate bows and spears. What other reason could their be for the sudden attack by a motley crew of lipstick-lace pervo-humanoids on three Mk 1 Warrior Cylons except the yarons-old cry of "Remember the Galactica?" Slide was thinking of withdrawing from the cortex to some less active area of the ship, when Rosa Coote moved into his field of vision. Like him, she was still in full space armor with the helmet locked down. Her voice came over his helmet radio, like a throaty crackle. suggestive. "You're sitting this orgy out, Yancey Slide?" "I don't think the party needs my help." "I never took you for a voyeur, Slide." "I'm not here to watch." "And definitely not tempted to strip your suit and go carnal?" Slide shook his head. "I don't think so." "Not even after a couple of shots of mugwump juice?" "No way?" "Yellow-bug powder?"

"Get thee behind me, Coote."

Maybe a century or more earlier, Slide might have gone into full demon rut and given even the Saphs a run for their money in debauchery, but too much happenstance had been battering on him

for full twelve episodes and more. Inclination to debauch was at low ebb, drained by cumulative circumstance. Also he had more than a passing concern with what might happen next. The Pirates of the Lower Quadrant were going at their riot of rapine as though there was no tomorrow. But tomorrow never knows, and Slide was interested in having a tale to tell beyond the moment, plus some guarantee of a future in which to tell it. He was far from certain how long the biocraft would stand up to this kind of treatment. The big Eloi ship was, after all, a living entity, self-aware, and if the now-missing Sternwood was to be believed, sensitive, maybe to the point of petulance. In a more conventional metal and electron vessel, the cortex would be the bridge, the nerve center of all ship-board operations. It the command center had fallen to the pirates with such ease, he could easily image that orgies of carnage that were going on in other, less crucial areas of the ship.

A one-eyed simian chud, with hideous dueling scars, came at Slide, with a keg o'grog under one arm and a brandishing a cutlass and pike in its second and third hands, clearly intending mischief. Suspecting a crude, blind-tiger morph, Slide shot the thing, and then spun his blaster back into its holster with deft nonchalance. Rosa Coote looked around and frowned. "How long do you think the craft, and whatever passes for it's nervous system, is going to tolerate all this looting, burning, and fornicating inside its essential mind?"

Clearly demons, no matter how diverse their origins, thought alike. Slide shrugged, but not without unease. "I have no idea, but I can imagine a bunch of really nasty scenarios should the ship get multilaterally pissed off."

Rosa gestured to the huge misshapen dermal ovoid that was centrepiece of the cortex. "If that's the ship's brain, there's serious neural-damage going on right now."

Rosa didn't exaggerate. Thirty meters above them, the tree-like gantry that surrounded the ovoid was on fire. Where selected Eloi had previously serviced the soft-ovoid's function, the primary fun was now recreational hanging. Except the hangings would clearly be a temporary recreation. A gang that called themselves the Pyros of the Caribbean hadn't been able to resist the dramatic temptation of an extensive but flimsy structure that proved to be highly flammable. They had zippoed the catwalks and fire licked along struts and spars, and up stairs and ladders. The Roy Bean Society of Erotic Asphyxiators were forced by the flames to take their ropes and go elsewhere in search of a high beam, a long drop, and some suitable sacrifices to dance orgasmic on the empty air. The outer sheath of the biocraft's "brain" that held the essential sentient ooze was blistered and scorched already, and, in a couple of places, burned away, exposing an inner

and more sensitive membrane.

"If that thing's got any capacity for pain, that's gotta hurt."

"I could be enjoying the experience."

"You wanna bet your continuance on that?

Slide shook his head. "Not me, lady."

As if in confirmation of Rosa's first observation, the banks of Eloi-eating orchids along the outer walls of the cortex were waving nervously, except for a few, clearly sterner flora, who grabbed all the digestible attackers they could reach. Slide grimaced. "For all we know, it could go into eterna-pod in the next minute."

A small cropulid flattened itself wetly on the contour-curved chest plate of Rosa's armor with a slight thwack and immediately probed with pseudo-pods. She ripped the single-cell loose and crushed it in the palm of a servo-assisted gauntlet. It squealed happily as its nucleus died.

"I think they only do that to make you kill them." She dropped the crushed cropulid and wiped her hands. "What happened to the queen and the vampire?

Slide made a noncommital gesture. "I kinda lost track of them when the pirates broke in. Last time I saw Lupo he had his helmet off and his fangs in the neck of some Barbary princess."

"I thought vampires only fed on humans."

Slide nodded. "That's what I heard."

"Do Barbary princesses qualify as human?"

"Seemingly they are close enough for Lupo."

Rosa Coote spotted the ex-Queen Mina. "She seems to have struck up a friendship with the Saphs of Nardaz."

Slide grimaced. "Is she aware of what she's getting into?"

"Knowing Queen Mina as I do, the more appropriate question might be 'are the Nardaz are aware of what they're getting into?'"

In their commandeered ventricle, the Corsairs of H'nad who liked their force-fucking ecclesiastical, now had four Eloi up on the 3D X-cross, simultaneously running squirm current through them and flaying flesh with a plasma scourge, but even the Corsairs paused in their highly liturgical persecutions when the first massive and botanical groan of pain and anger shook the ship.

Slide looked askance. "Uh-oh."

Rosa agreed. "That's not good."

The sudden and grinding burst of telepathic fury that followed the groan made Slide glad his own mind-reading capacities were fairly limited. Those better tuned to the thoughts of plants clutched at their brain cases, and some even dropped to their knees, or an approximation thereof.

Rosa winced."That's even worse."

For Slide, the projected image was of unfocused, but vicious and all-encompassing, violent vegetable revenge. "The ships getting mad."

Rosa nodded. "And I don't want to be around when it gets even."

Slide hesitated, and within the bowl of her helmet Rosa arched an eyebrow. "What's the problem, boychick?"

"It seems like I arrive everyplace only to have to lam out before I've hardly had time to get acquainted."

"You want to get acquainted with this mess?"

"No, but…"

Rosa worked the eyebrow again. "But what?"

"If I blind-jump one more time I could wind up bare-ass discorporate."

Slide felt that he was admitting weakness to another demon, but Rosa's laugh crackled through his radio. "Is that all that's worrying you?"

"Isn't discorporation enough?"

"Your worries are over on that count, Yancey Slide."

"What?"

"I have a way out for us, but we have to hurry. Aside from what the ship might do, I also see something that you might consider bad news."

Slide turned. "Bad news?"

"You're on the lam from the IIA and the Pentecostals, right?"

"And Nuygen von Bulow, and fuck knows how many others."

"And the beef is time-crime?"

"That's supposed to be the story, except in my continuity, I don't remember having done a damn thing."

Rosa wasn't buying this. "Not a damn thing? Gimme a break."

"Not time-crime."

"Well, whether you remember it of not, you may have troubles."

Slide twitched. "Say what? Nuygen's here with the pirates?"

Rosa shook her head. "Not Nuygen, but I think I see two of IIA Black Concluders over on the far side of the cortex."

The area was now so filled with smoke that Slide could see very little. "Where?"

"Beyond that red membrane thing."

Rosa was right; two figures in black skin-suits, and skullcaps under goldfish bowl helmets, could only be Concluders in full field kit. "You'd better show me that way out."

"Just follow me, kid."

They grabbed each others gloves and stepped over an Eloi being ravished by a frenzy of small fat Simolians, but seemingly loving every minute of it. Loving it so much, in fact, that, when her attackers rapidly abandoned her, as was the way of Simolians, she lurched to

her feet and screamed after them to finish her.

Rosa indicated one of the arterial tunnels that led out of the cortex and into the leafy depths of the ship. As they entered it, Slide saw a cluster of bouncing rubberoid spheres coming rapidly up behind them. In an instant of dislike, he spun, drew, and blasted three of them. The others rapidly changed course and bounced back the way they had come, bleating and squeaking. Rosa nodded approvingly. "You're really quite the pistoleer, aren't you?"

"That's what they used to say."

Slide and Rosa emerged from the arterial tunnel into a vault-like chamber filled with foliage where nothing overly dramatic was being acted, just some nude Eloi and naked pirates engaging in a sloppy but an apparently consensual leaf-mold yabyum orgy, although Slide did notice orchids stealthily closing in, as if intending to turn the fuck-fest into a botanic gourmet delight. Rosa seemed also to notice the danger, because she quickened her pace, and, at the same time scanned the surrounding undergrowth as though searching for something.

"There…" She pointed and Slide saw. A Howdy Hole surrounded by cute little flowers.

"How the fuck did that get there?"

Rosa spread her gloved hands. "Don't ask me. I discovered it in my wanderings before you arrived."

"And brought all the trouble with me?"

"I didn't say that."

"I sensed you think it."

Rosa Coote said nothing, but Slide still had a momentary need to explain. "I usually control the flow."

"Like, you run the action, Yancey?"

"You know it."

"But you've time looped and the actions running you?"

"You got it."

Rosa Coote smiled with a surprising sadness."That's the worst part of being on the run." She seemed about to say more but an deafening and protracted shriek vibrated their helmets. The noise was so intense that Slide ducked, feeling as though he on the inside of some tortured, galaxy spanning nerve. "Damn! The ship is doing something double plus ungood." The shriek was repeated. Rosa stepped briskly to the Howdy Hole. Even with the helmet radio, she had to shout to be heard above the ululating biocraft. "I think that's our exit line." But Slide suddenly didn't want to be on his own in limbo again. "Rosa…

Rosa laid the fingertips of a glove quickly to his lucite. "No tender goodbyes, Yancey Slide. We need to be out of here." And with that she had dropped from sight. Slide took a deep breath of canned, space

armor air, and followed her. *The reality of the Eloi biocraft winked out, but Slide found himself in a place that was no better, and perhaps actually worse. He was immediately assailed by machine gun and rapid cannon fire. He was in a burning, spinning flying machine of a kind he did not recognize. Someone was screaming in Hebrew that he should bail out. He knew it was only a first-shock Gantenbrink hallucination conjured by the sub-atomic foam, and that Howdy Holes were like that, but he still hurled himself through an open hatch and spun into thin air. He counted to ten and pulled the ripcord on his C20 style parachute, but at the first jerk of the opening chute the hallucination vanished and he was assaulted by disembodied, abstract, and wholly meaningless words.*

CONSEQUENTIAL MANGLE OEDIPUS DIGRAM DIFFRACTOMETER REPENT ARIZONA PERVERSION TV FORGIVEN LIABLE GRIFFIN COMPETITION MONADIC CHAMFER CHLORINATE CONCEPTUAL ALEXANDER PEAL SEISMOGRAPHY SPATE ELITE CONVERSE LETHARGY PREFERENCE ANA FLASH COCO EUCRE BANBURY TIMON ESTES RADIUM PUNDIT SENT BRENDAN CLARET CHICKEN VENGEFUL AMERADA CERAMIC CLEANUP!

"What the fuck is this?"

"What did you expect? A vision of the Rapture?"

CLIMATOLOGY BEECHAM ABSTAIN KETOSIS SNARE ALTOGETHER COINCIDE TWICE ALEXIS IMPEACH DIVERT PLUMP BLOCKADE PLUTONIUM SLOPE BENNETT COS THREE DUTCHMAN INERTANCE CONSPICUOUS MILITATE KAZOO CAVEMAN AVOCET KRUSE WHITCOMB NEWBOLD ADULATE ANGSTROM COURAGE CHURCHWOMEN DETACH PYONGYANG ATAVISM DESIDERATA COOLHEADED UNIPROCESSOR MANOR THERE'LL ANONYMITY DISCOMFIT!

"Out, out, I want out. I had enough of the unintelligible."

CLEAVAGE AUTOMATA ALGORITHM ANGLOPHOBIA FISCHER MUSSEL ARID TACK TWINE ILLUSIVE SNAKELIKE SKYLIGHT FIREHOUSE REVOCABLE BEDEVIL GENTRY BITT KNURL HESPERUS BEREA ANGULAR BUCHANAN CROWBERRY BEGINNER ATTACHE AMBASSADOR OFTEN HARROW BMW MAYA CHENEY FETE SHATTERPROOF MULLEN CRAVAT DOMINGO ARMOUR ECONOMIC RESULT CURTAIN WORKMANLIKE TEAMSTER CRYPTANALYST EMPLACE FANG BOOKSHELVES COLA AMPERSAND AMESLAN APPREHENSIVE FRIEDMAN CINEMA UMBRA EXCAVATE ARK CURDLE CONCILIATORY DOSSIER CRANKCASE!

And no sooner had he asked than he was out. The Howdy Hole appeared obliging, but then revealed itself as ferociously tricky, because the first thing Slide discovered was that he was no longer human. He had massive muscular hind legs, and tiny hands and arms, with disproportionately large claws. His enormous mouth was full of

sharp-pointed reptilian teeth, and his breath reeked of old blood and rotting flesh.

"I'm in the fucking Jurassic and, if I read the polish on the claws correctly, I'm in the body of a goddamned velociraptor."

He wanted to yell. "Fuck this prehistoric shit!"

But it just came out as thunderous lizard bellow.

notes

Notes